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The Double Meaning of Destitution

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"What do we do with what we have done?"[1] – The practical self-reflexiveness of this question assumes a special meaning, when that which was "done", which the sentence refers to, involves an insurrection, one that can certainly be regarded as "successful", but not in the sense that the "success" of this insurrection consisted in taking over power. Had the latter been the case, then the meaning of the question would inevitably have been unambiguous: a "revolutionary" break would separate what is to be done now from all actions that first created the preconditions for what is currently to be done; and this break would make the conducting of the insurrection appear, more or less clearly, as the subject matter of a specific *historiography* on the one hand, whereas on the other it would open up the terrain, in which the current task field of *governing* could appear (although its formulated objectives would certainly be expected to maintain a certain congruence with those of the insurrection). But what if no break of this kind prefigured the double sense of (past and present) actions? What if it was not a matter of "appropriating a truth about what had happened" – a truth that simultaneously presupposes and actuates the described break –, but rather of "probing the newly opening perspectives for

action" and "elaborating" the becoming that is articulated in what happened?[2]

Destitution as Opening: Insurrection and Deposition

Let us look at the political social situation, in which the opening question, taken from a book by the Colectivo Situaciones that is active in Buenos Aires, as well as its provisionally only briefly outlined implications are specifically located. This relates to the Argentinian insurrection movements that became manifest especially on 19 and 20 December 2001, which formed at the apex of the Argentinian state, economic and financial crisis induced by the neoliberal policies of Carlos Menem and, in the end, the lack of international financial aid, after private savings accounts had been frozen, among other things, on 1 December of that year, to protect the parity of the Argentinian peso with the US dollar. Borne by a multiplicity of social actors, ranging from the Argentinian middle class, loudly expressing their resentment about the freezing of their savings in *cacerolazos* ("pot-banging demonstrations"), to the unemployed people of various *piqueteros* groups and their specific forms of action (street barricades, collective meals, parades, etc.), according to the description from the Colectivo Situaciones, which is the point of interest here, the movements found their point of unification especially in the demand *¡Que se vayan todos!* ("All of them should go!"). This demand had some measure of success, at least in the form of a whole series of resignations of respectively appointed state presidents at the turn of the year 2001/2002.

What primarily interests me here is less a detailed discussion of the events in Argentina in December 2001[3] than a close observation of the motifs that the militant research of Colectivo Situaciones

sees in them (and in which they took part): the motif of destitution or the deposing, destituting insurrection. What is striking about this motif in the analysis of Colectivo Situaciones is certainly that it dissolves the link between the destituting movement and the specific institutive gesture, which ties the deposition or disempowerment of the ruling political forces a priori to the political *purpose* or *end* of a re-institution, a renewed institution and occupation of the – even if possibly reformed – organs of the exercise of power in the sense of governing:

> "The sovereign and creative forces incited a rebellion, to which they tied no intentions of *instituting* power – as it is anticipated by the political doctrine of sovereignty –, but instead exercised their power to depose the established political forces. This is probably the paradox of the days of 19 and 20 December. An entirety of *instituting* forces far removed from founding a new sovereign order, which instead delegitimized the politics carried out in their names."[4]

At first glance, this suspension of the institutive end appears as a pause at exactly the point that is capable of evoking the political *horror vacui* par excellence: an abhorrence of the vacuum of political power and its functions of founding laws and social order. The political effects of this *horror vacui* are numerous: they range from the legitimization figures of an authoritarian, sometimes putschist power of order over the attempt to prevent the emergence of this kind of vacuum (invoking the specter of ungovernability, alleviating social tensions, pushing security doctrines, etc.), all the way to the themes, dominant in the history of leftist political theory, of possible (new) ways to fill this vacuum (revolutionary takeover of power, renewal of the legal systems, institutional apparatuses, governing techniques, etc.). The latter

lead back to the initially mentioned configuration of the question "What do we do with what we have done?", which subsequently interprets the "vacuum" simply as a "break" – in other words, to the configuration that is specifically undermined by the motif of destituting power.

However, the vacuum is only a vacuum to the extent that it is measured against the aforementioned functions of political power and the representation of political "subjects" linked to them. Relying on the described *horror vacui* in analyzing destitution decoupled from re-institution would hence mean identifying the question of the political or political power with just these functions, specifically by disregarding a social positivity, which I would like to call *political appearance* here. Yet it is precisely this question of political appearance – especially under the name of "social protagonism" – that concerns the Colectivo Situaciones:

> "Destitution is a process of the greatest significance: if the politics previously carried out by a sovereign power is realized in the state constitution of the social, the *destituting* action appears to be a different form of conducting politics or expressing social transformation. Destitution holds no *a-political* stance: the refusal to maintain representative politics (of sovereignty) is the condition – and the premise – of a 'situational' thinking and of all the practices, whose potentials for meaning can no longer be demanded from the state."[5]

The "practice of destitution that expands the field of the possible" can thus be linked "with conducting social protagonism that is not limited to the functions of founding sovereignty"[6] and gives expression to the aforementioned potentials of meaning outside the realm of the figures of state representation. From this perspective,

as the research of the Colectivo Situaciones shows, not only can demonstrations, neighborhood assemblies, barter practices or new forms of political organization be analyzed, but also looting, for example. To the extent that one is willing to abandon the view linked with the *horror vacui* described above, which makes the mere fact of looting appear exclusively as (ultimately abstract) evidence for the "war of everyone against everyone" in the absence of a state power of order, looting shows itself to be an ambivalent network of social agency permeated by differences and linked with gestures of self-constraint.[7]

Yet other political-social struggles can also be regarded from the same perspective of a social protagonism, such as the struggle of the Sans-Papiers, which is situated exactly on one of the central intersections of state political representation, namely that of coupling political citizenship with belonging to a (nation-) state. Not only would it be obviously absurd to understand migrants without papers as a "revolutionary subject" of the type seeking to take over power in some form, but the struggles of the Sans Papiers can also not be reduced to fighting for inclusion in the existing apparatuses of political representation – unless one disregards the structural zone of intersection between the (juridical, economic, etc.) dispositives of the nation-state and its supra-national extensions as well as the dispositives of the globalized economies and politics engendering new dependencies and forms of exploitation, in which these struggles are located and which are made manifest by them. Destitution is expressed here in practices of "becoming invisible" (in the face of state powers of control), which are linked with specific knowledge productions and networks of social agency, as well as in new forms of political organization and the affirmation of a newly conceived political situationality.[8]

Let us note three moments of the concept and the practice of destitution as demonstrated here, which may shed a somewhat clearer light on the notion of political appearance at the same time:

1) First of all, the concept of destitution is to be detached from a certain dialectical grid, which may appear obvious at first glance: it is not the "work of negativity" that is centrally effective in destitution, but rather a "positive no" (Colectivo Situaciones), which in the rejection of a certain figure of representation simultaneously – and not first through taking over or influencing to change institutional political functions – produces a "self-changing" *affirmation* that engenders new practices and modes of subjectification, from which the "no" first derives its force. Understood in this way, destitution is neither a deposition relating to the purpose or end of a re-institution of the fullness of power, nor simply a rejection in the sense of a disinvolvement, but rather indicates, first of all, a *social practice*.

The motif is not entirely new, even though it arrives at a new topicality in the contexts described. It is one of the central motifs in Walter Benjamin's essay "On the Critique of Violence" from 1921, specifically in the form of the question of the positivity of the strike – or more precisely: Benjamin's reading of the "proletarian general strike" as distinct from the "political general strike", which merely seeks to achieve ends that are external to labor and to one's own action, and which thus achieves no transformation of labor and action. The proletarian general strike, on the other hand, eludes, according to Benjamin, the "dialectical rising and falling" in the historical political "formations of violence" continued through law-making and law-preserving, because it is like "an upheaval that this kind of strike not so much causes as consummates"[9]. The logic of action described here is that of a de-position, which is not oriented a priori to framework conditions

of action modified for a performative new positing or re-institution, but rather to the opening of a field of changing *possibilities* for action.[10]

2) In all of this, however, a misunderstanding is to be avoided, which frequently occurs in social romantic form, grounded, however, in a certain – often Spinozist-influenced – variation of metaphysical natural law theory conceptions: the misunderstanding that the described affirmation is already necessarily emancipatory per se. The Colectivo Situaciones book cited here is not entirely free from this itself, yet it supplies clear evidence for the problems that are linked with a perspective of this kind:

> "The most diverse slogans could be heard, first in the city districts of Buenos Aires, then in the Plaza de Mayo. *'Anyone who doesn't skip along is an Englishman.'* – *'Anyone who doesn't skip along is a military.'* Or *'traitors to the fatherland against the wall.' 'Cavallo – you are a pig.'* – *'Argentina, Argentina.'* And the cry most frequently heard on 19 December: *'You can stick the state of emergency up yours.'* And later the first *'Que se vayan todos.'* The potpourri of demo slogans made the struggles of the past newly manifest in the present."[11]

And it is not difficult to recognize that with these struggles of the past, the nationalisms and chauvinisms of the past also reappear. Not only is the indeterminacy of the affirmation in the destituent movement, as a "collective affirmation of the possible"[12], open to very different codings, it is also borne by ambivalences and historical political structurings of affect, which are by no means emancipatory per se or a purely rebellious present (just as little as they engender pure violent chaos, as the other – to put it briefly: Hobbesian – variation of natural law theory imaginaries would

claim); instead they are permeated by re-actualizations of political and probably also personal "struggles of the past", which underlay that which is possible with a pre-formed reality and – literally – re-actionary facilitations.

3) It thus seems all the more important to pay attention to the difference that the texts cited above introduce into a series of political concepts: they speak of "sovereign and creative forces", which do not seek, however, to found a "new sovereign order"; of "instituent forces", although these are not linked with "instituting intentions". We can certainly come to an understanding about this difference that appears in the terminology, based on the difference between *potentia* and *potestas* that is currently frequently cited in political theory. In the following, however, the focus is on the question of the institution or instituting, the virulence of which has an obvious connection to the motif that was the starting point for these reflections: the motif of destitution and its relation to an expansion of the "field of the possible".

Destitution as Destruction: Subject Condition, Subjectification and the Question of Instituent Activity

Let us first consider a meaning of the concept of destitution that appears to be diametrically opposed to the one discussed so far. In the final section of his book *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Giorgio Agamben outlines an interpretation of the modalities of possibility (to be able to be), contingency (to be able not to be), impossibility (not to be able to be), and necessity (not to be able not to be), which detaches these modalities from their classical roots in logic and ontology, relating them to a theory of subjectivity. Agamben reads the first two – possibility and contingency – as "operators of subjectification". In contrast, "impossibility, as negation of

possibility [...], and necessity, as negation of contingency [...], are the operators of desubjectification, of the destruction and destitution of the subject"[13]. Agamben takes over the concept of destitution from Primo Levi, who spoke of the experience of "extreme destitution" (*destituzione estrema*) in the Nazi death and concentration camps. Here it means anything but a deposing power; instead it characterizes an impotence that is not simply the absence of any capacity, but rather the *experience* of the annihilating separation of the subject from his or her executive capacities, experience of desubjectification reaching to the limit of the capacity for experience:

> "[Possibility and contingency] constitute Being in its subjectivity, that is, in the final analysis as a world that is always *my* world, since it is in my world that possibility exists and touches (*contingit*) the real. Necessity and impossibility, instead, define Being in its wholeness and solidity, pure substantiality without subject – that is, at the limit, a world that is never *my* world since possibility does not exist in it."[14]

It is hardly necessary to say that a world, which is only *my* world to the extent that possibility exists in it, is also the only world that is open to change, a world in which "another world" is possible. However, it is also a world that is principally in danger of being set up as "pure substantiality", which annihilates every possibility.

Agamben's considerations do not at all seek to re-establish classical subject theory conceptions. Instead they explore a thinking – from the extreme of its annihilation – of *living* subjectivity, which is only a different name for a historically politically situated capacity of subjectification, a "a field of forces always already traversed by the [...] historically determined currents of potentiality and

impotentiality, of being able not to be and not being able not to be"[15]. This capacity of subjectification is exposed to the condition of a fundamental passivity, in which its specific possibilities and the capacity of expanding these possibilities are grounded, in which, however, also its seizure, its injury and its boundless destruction[16] are located. It is exactly at this point that the theory of testimony is located, which Agamben develops in conjunction with the passages quoted and based on a specific interpretation of the problem of linguistic reference as verbally actualized contingency and touching the real. A detailed discussion of this theory is not possible here; I will therefore limit myself to referring to the conjunction between the possibility of testimony and that of resistance, which is implicitly at stake in it.[17]

What is crucial for the considerations developed here is that the concept of destitution, which previously appeared as destituent power, as a name for a capacity of subjectification – releasing the possible – now indicates a *subject condition*, which exposes every capacity for subjectification not only to negation or "alienated" representation, but also the extreme of its systematic annihilation. In fact, Agamben's analysis does not relate simply to the counterpart of "representative politics" in a sense that might be situational but is also capable of generalization in many respects, but rather to the institutional apparatus of an industrialized politics of annihilation that directly takes hold of those it persecutes, a politics that eludes any generalization. It is a politics that nevertheless undoubtedly mobilized its own – predominantly anti-Semitic – figures of representation and never carried out its work of annihilation independently from strategies of *symbolic* annihilation. What destitution means in the experience of the Nazi camps is, in Adorno's words, "worse than death"[18], namely the

disintegration of subjective existence with the mobilization of all institutional power.

Ultimately, however, the situational is not decided by what is capable of generalization, but rather by what is "generally valid" in a different sense: namely by what, in every situation, can be actualized or robbed of its possibilities of actualization.[19] The problem that Agamben's analysis poses is thus, after all, that of the interlocking of the double meaning of "institution" (as a functive of political representation, setting up the scope of the possible, regulating, constraining, managing it – and still managing it in the will to annihilation – on the one hand and as instituent practice on the other) with the double meaning of "destitution" (as the release of a "field of the possible" and as the destruction of the – always contingent – possibility of subjectification as such). Institution and destitution, also in this sense, are by no means in a relationship of a dialectical opposition, the opposition, for example, that has long made insurrection appear as an unresolvable problem of political juridical theory[20]. Rather, what should be presumed is a relationship of complex implications, which opens up the field of political struggles and, to return to our initial theme, makes an *instituent moment that is not an end* manifest in the midst of the destituent insurrection.

Despite the apparent conceptual opposition, destitution as "destituent power" would thus yield the outlines of an *instituent activity*, which is emancipatorily different from the institutional apparatuses that limit the field of the possible and which, incidentally, perhaps cannot be grasped with – here largely omitted – conceptualisations of "constitution". In this sense, talk of "instituent forces" (Colectivo Situaciones) is not to be over hastily regarded as an example of a "new constitution of the multitude"[21], but rather to be taken literally. It is possible that

the reason for the frequently lamented poverty of political (and not only immediately political) institutions is specifically that the function of institutions has almost always been regarded as dependent on a constitution in the sense of an *antecedent composition*. And this may also be the reason why the opposition of constituent and constituted power, which undoubtedly seeks to undermine the antecedence of the composition, results in a *practical* paradox (that of the permanently "constituting republic") [22], which leaves little scope for a new understanding of the institution or the instituent. At this point, however, it might be possible to attempt a re-conception of the instituent, which would not ignore the critique of the institutional and the power of destitution described above, but would instead focus on a positivity of the instituent action against this background.

In his lectures at the Collège de France in 1954/55, devoted to the question of instituting/institution, Maurice Merleau-Ponty placed the concept of the institution not in a *hierarchical functional conjunction* with the concept of the constitution, but rather *in opposition* to it. Merleau-Ponty's reflections start from a critique of the philosophy of consciousness, which remains inscribed in the language in which these reflections are formulated; nevertheless, they can certainly also be read in the sense of the thinking of the capacity for subjectification outlined above, and explicitly aim, not least of all, for a thinking of subjectivity in its political social historicity:

> "Yet if the subject is instituent, not constituent, then one can understand that it is not limited to its momentary being and that the other is not the negative of my self. What I have started at certain crucial moments, is neither in a distant past as an objective memory, nor is it current as a lived memory, but is found

> instead in this in-between realm [*l'entre-deux*] like the field of my becoming during this period of time. Hence my relationship to others could not be reduced to an alternative: an instituent subject can co-exist with an other, because that which is instituted is not the immediate reflection of its actions. This can be taken up again subsequently by itself or by others without being a complete re-creation. In this way it is like a hinge between the others and me, on the one hand, and between me and my self, on the other, as consequence and guarantee of our belonging to the world."[23]

It seems that it is this kind of shared field of becoming that is meant – translated into the language of the political – in the question quoted in the beginning, "What do we do with what we have done?", which the power of destitution aims to open up, and whose potentials of meaning cannot be redeemed by the figures of existing institutional structures. It may become visible in events such as those of 19 and 20 December, and yet it does not exist independently from an instituent activity that is not completed in these events and does not end with them.

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[1]Colectivo Situaciones, *¡Que se vayan todos! Krise und Widerstand in Argentinien*, Berlin: Assoziation A 2003, p. 34 (title of the original Argentinian edition: *Colectivo Situaciones: Apuntes para el nuevo protagonismo social*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones De Mano en mano 2002).

[2]Cf. ibid.

[3]In addition to the book by the Colectivo Situaciones already cited, see, for example: Hugo Moreno, *Le désastre argentin. Péronisme, politique et violence sociale (1930–2001)*, Paris: Editions Syllepse 2005, p. 177–200, and the retrospective analyses in *Argentiniens (Post-)Krise: Symbole und Mythen*, *kultuRRevolution*, Nr. 51, 1/2006.

[4]Colectivo Situaciones, *¡Que se vayan todos!*, op. cit., p. 35.

[5]Ibid., p. 36.

[6]Cf. ibid.

[7]As a mother tells, whose son was involved in looting a butcher shop together with several other people: *"My son said that some of them first went to work on the cash register. So he threw the cash register on the floor so that the others could not get to the money, but should only take the food that they needed. Then a fight started and my son left. But first he took food for all of us and even brought some cheese."* (Quoted from: ibid., p. 107)

[8]Cf. the affirmation of the "local" as a condensed reflection of the global towards the end of the "Déclaration de l'Ambassade Universelle", the founding document of the Brussels Universal Embassy (www.universal-embassy.be; unfortunately the Declaration is currently not online [27 May 2007]).

[9]Cf. Walter Benjamin, "Zur Kritik der Gewalt", in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II.1, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1991, p. 179–203, here p. 202 and 194 [Engl. translation: "Critique of Violence", in Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Sorter, London: New Left Books 1979, p. 132–154]; Benjamin derives the concepts of the

proletarian and the political general strike from Georges Sorel's *Réflexions sur la violence* (1908).

[10]On this, cf. Werner Hamacher, "Affomativ, Streik", in: Ch. L. Hart Nibbrig (Ed.), *Was heißt "Darstellen"?*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1994, p. 340–371, especially p. 360.

[11]Colectivo Situaciones, op. cit., p. 27 f.

[12]Ibid., p. 28.

[13]Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive,* trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Zone Books: New York, 1999, p. 147.

[14]Ibid. (the existing English translation of this passage is erroneous and has therefore been altered).

[15]Ibid., p. 147 f.

[16]Cf. Maurice Blanchot, "L'indestructible", in: *L'entretien infini*, Paris: Gallimard 1969, especially p. 200, and Sarah Kofman, *Paroles suffoquées*, Paris: Galilée 1987. – At the same time, at the theoretical level Agamben's thinking is permanently in discussion with the "certain vitalism" of poststructural theory construction as present in Foucault or Deleuze, for example, which refutes every substantialization of "life", only to see in this concept, nevertheless, the cypher of immanent processes of subjectification (self-affection: "self"-actualization and "self"-effectuation).

[17]This is a conjunction that was already preformulated in Ferdinand Bruckner's drama *Die Rassen* (in: F. Bruckner, Dramen, Vienna/Cologne: Böhlau 1990, p. 345-443) in 1933: "Helene It is our only paltry resistance, – / Karlanner (*nods*) You fight. / Helene

– that nothing is covered up, that all testimonies remain preserved" (p. 418). The scope of this conjunction, which calls for a break in the understanding of testimony after Auschwitz, was hardly to be foreseen even in 1933.

[18]Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1975, p. 364.

[19]Cf. the distinction between the precondition of a "capability of generalization" of (just) ends by law, which abstracts from situationality, and situation-specific "general validity" as criterion of justice in Walter Benjamin's writing (op. cit., p. 196); this distinction should also be noted by all those who impute – partly with critical intentions, partly following uncritically – that Agamben declares the entire contemporary world to be a Nazi camp.

[20]Cf. my reflections especially on Kant's condemnation of rebellion in "The Condition of Becoming Public", *transversal web journal*, http://eipcp.net/transversal/1203/nowotny/en, and Agamben's considerations of the question of a "right to resistance" in *Etat d'exception*, Paris: Deuil 2003, p. 24 ff.

[21]As maintained by Toni Negri in a critique of the cited book by the Colectivo Situaciones, cf. www.generation-online.org/t/sitcol.htm (28 May 2007)

[22]Cf. Toni Negri, "Repubblica Costituente. Umrisse einer konstituierenden Macht", in: T. Negri / M. Lazzarato / P. Virno, *Umherschweifende Produzenten. Immaterielle Arbeit und Subversion*, Berlin: ID Verlag 1998, p. 67–82, especially p. 80.

[23]Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “L’institution dans l’histoire personelle et publique”, in: *L’institution. La passivité. Notes de cours au Collège de France (1954/55)*, Paris: Belin 2003, p. 123.