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The dynamics of the political event

Process of subjectivation and micropolitics

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> Uprisings belong to history. But somehow, they elude it.
> *Michel Foucault*

The demise of classical forms of 'revolutionary politics'

In this chapter we question what 'revolutionary politics' and 'revolutionary subject' have become, in light of the micropolitics of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as well as Michel Foucault's microphysics of power, and draw some lessons from the struggle of the *intermittents*, both very distant and very close to these theoretical questions.

Are Deleuze and Guattari's micropolitics, as Alan Badiou suggests, a theory 'yearned for by the *doxa* of bodies, desire, affect, network, multitudes, nomadism and joy, where all contemporary 'politics' is spoilt, as in a Spinozism of the poor'? And is Foucault's microphysics of power 'always a mixture of genealogies of symbolic

forms and a virtual (or desiring) theory of bodies [...] that could go under the name of linguistic anthropology'?[1] Contrary to what these questions might suggest, whilst their critics are arrogant and dishonest, micropolitics and microphysics can be said to be the first great theories to really problematise the neutralisation of 'revolutionary politics' and the 'revolutionary subject' carried out by capitalism since the Soviet Revolution. According to Foucault, as they developed in Christian Europe power and politics have been radically disrupted by the birth of the economy.[2] At the end of the 19th century, the workers movement, especially its Marxist variant, and the revolutions that broke out at the end of World War One successfully exploited the problematic relationship between the economy and the political, and turned it against capitalism. Carl Schmitt, whose concept of power was certainly neither juridical nor economic, believed that it was impossible in capitalism to speak of the 'political' and the 'political subject' without going through the economy.[3] By the time Foucault analysed the liberal theory arising after the Soviet Revolution and read its transformation of power and politics, the problem had completely shifted. The working class that in the inter-war US New Deal and the Fordist pact after World War Two had been integrated into industrial society, was defeated and 'de-proletarianised' (as the Ordo-liberals would say) after the 1970s, whilst industrial society was being dismantled, no longer the centre of the world economy. The introduction of a 'new domain and field' that Foucault calls the 'social' now 'neutralised' (or depoliticised) the problematic relationship between politics and the economy, which the 'revolution' had exploited and overturned. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this growing panoply of *dispositifs* and techniques (semiotic, scientific, cultural, communicative and of insurance) significantly blurred the boundaries between the economy and politics and deeply

transformed the role of the State,[4] thus rendering the tactics and strategies devised by revolutionary politics inoperable.

According to Foucault, overlapping *dispositifs* of sovereignty, discipline and biopolitics simultaneously give rise to and produce large binary divisions (classes, sexes, etc.) and the 'optimisation of systems of difference', similarly to the macro and microphysics of power that constitute the two inseparable sides of governmentality. By means of these *dispositifs* power is also configured as the government of 'subjects of rights' and 'living subjects'. Similarly, according to Deleuze and Guattari, in contemporary capitalism power is exercised through molar and molecular *dispositifs*, and these are distinct and yet inseparable moments.[5] The social subjugation that assigns roles, functions and identities to individuals is coupled with the machinic subjugation that traverses both the pre-individual dimension of affects, perceptions and desires, and the realm of their trans-individuality.

The techniques and *dispositifs* that 'neutralised', continuously defused, and newly instituted the class dualisms that revolutionary politics was able to turn into a 'class war', are both macropolitical and micropolitical and tie the economic, social, political, cultural, and technological together, displacing the field of struggle and requiring new weapons.

The 'Marxian' gesture reclaimed by Deleuze and Guattari and practiced by Foucault (it is impossible to speak of politics and political subjects without going through the *dispositifs* of capitalism as they are), seems to make no sense to Badiou and Rancière, for whom politics takes care of itself and the subject is exclusively defined by the act of its own declaration. In order to save a politics destroyed and completely reconfigured by the capitalist response to the October Revolution, they take refuge in universalism and

formalism, where the whole singularity of power relations, conflicts and processes of subjectivation in contemporary capitalism is lost, and the only question is that of the event, excess, and rupture.

But this singularity is the very question that Foucault's microphysics of power and Deleuze and Guattari's micropolitics address. How should a 'war machine' function when the objective is not war (or the seizure of power in its institutional or armed forms)? When the power it confronts manages dualisms through the optimisation of differentiations and individualisations? How does subjectivity act at the molar and molecular level to subtract itself from the designations of the government of conducts and subjugations? How does it affirm itself both as a political and an existential subject? What is the relationship between ethics (the transformation of the self) and politics given the conditions of contemporary capitalism?

Micropolitics and microphysics have another important function. They substantiate what had been rediscovered in 1968: that 'the revolution in modern Europe was not only a political project, but also a form of life',[6] as well as what 1968 had affirmed politically: that changes in individual conducts and changes in the configuration of the world go hand in hand. In the 20th century, communism dulled the relationship between politics and ethics, politics and 'life style'; whilst Stalinism wiped it out. The 'care of the self and others' that Foucault refers to, and the production of the world and subjectivity that Deleuze and Guattari wrote of, activated a 'new militantism', deeply rooted in the history of the West.[7]

The movement of the *intermittents* was invested by all these questions, and, being rooted in a specific situation, its responses were partial but meaningful.

The event and history: against Idealism

The first great innovation introduced by the micropolitics and microphysics of power is the theory of the event, which questions the relation between time and history in order to distance action from the idealism of the philosophy of history. To start with, the dynamics of the birth and constitution of the political movement of the *intermittents* can be described through this theory of the event.

The event is what crops up from history and sinks back into it without being history itself. The event is immanent to economic, social and political history, but not reducible to it. What is called 'history' here must be understood as the product of the multiplicity of discursive and non-discursive devices of subjectivation and subjugation that we have already described. As far as the conflict of the *intermittents* is concerned, these are: the condition of their employment, work and life, the processes of subjectivation in which they are caught (waged, entrepreneur, poor, and unemployed), and the public space as it is constituted and codified by the logics of representation and mediation.

Following Foucault, the place of the intellectual in relation to the event lies in the reconstruction of an end of history for the movement of the *intermittents* by a political collective (*les Précaires Associés de Paris*- the Associated Precarious Workers of Paris - PAP) that, from the end of 2002, keeps, 'almost from underneath history, looking out for what disrupts and agitates it', watching over what will come 'slightly at the rearguard of politics' as it is exercised. The PAP watch over and prepare an event that they can only anticipate in a very indeterminate way. Working for the event means working for the unpredictable.[8]

The movement of the *intermittents* of course has its own historical, social, economic and political conditions, but in its emergence as an event, it diverts from these conditions to create something new, new possibilities of action and new modes of subjectivation. There is something in the event that cannot be reduced to the social determinisms of causal series, in the sense that its conditions do not contain all of its effects. The Coordination of *intermittents* and precarious workers, its practices, and its way of doing and speaking are neither directly deducible from their conditions of work, employment and unemployment, nor can they be reduced to the codifications of existing social and political spaces, and their *dispositifs* of subjectivation and subjugation. For them, the question is to understand the continuities and discontinuities (of action, problems and practices) that the socio-economic and political situation entertains with the event. Therefore, the event cannot be *completely* deduced from a history from whence it comes and in which it inscribes itself anew.

In the case we are most interested in, the event is a date and a place: the night between the 26th and the 27th of June 2003, at the theatre La Colline, where thousands of people, pushed by their rejection of the 'reform', crossed a political and existential threshold. The crossing of this threshold was instantaneous and collective and produced a rupture, a discontinuity in 'history' and subjectivity. The event does not affect the state of things it emerges from without first *affecting the subjectivities* that partake and position themselves in it, saying 'no'. Something changed in the life and society that interrogates subjectivity: what happens, what's happened, what will happen? This instantaneous subjective change is an act of both resistance and creation, resistance to power and creation of possibilities whose limits are not clearly established. These possibilities are not just 'pure and simple' or abstract; they

are ‘living possibilities’ because they are already involved in a given situation, in the specific conditions of intermittence, of the cultural labour market, the re-foundation of the social, the treatment of unemployment by the activation of passive spending, etc. For this reason, they are not already there, prior to the event, but created by the event and emerging with it. The event is a bifurcation, a disengagement from the law, norms and existing values. Unstable and unbalanced, its emergence opens up a process of subjectivation and its modalities of existence and action are still undetermined. The event and its date are points of reversal and diversion that knock off balance thousands of people, plunging them into a different situation that they have no preconception about. The event is an opening, a possibility of self transformation and, consequently, of changing the socio-political situation. A new universe is opened up and those who cross this threshold can engage in new relations, new modes of thinking and doing, new knowledge and affects.

These possibilities are first and foremost *felt* rather than *conceived*, because the subjective mutation is primarily non discursive. There is a multiplicity of reasons and causes (economic, political, social etc.) for refusal and revolt, but the meaning of the act that embodies them presents itself straightforwardly to its agents, in a non discursive modality and with a clarity that is not of the same order as that which these reasons and causes can be ascribed to. It comes as an existential rupture that does not merely transform consciousness and discourse. This issue must be addressed if we wish to ‘enrich language, generate and pollinate a new discursive field’[9] and new modes of action and organisation. This non discursive rupture sparks off a process of production of subjectivity that, on the one hand, fosters its own rules and norms, and on the other allows the word to proliferate. This happened, in an

exemplary way, during the occupation of the Olympe de Gouge theatre, where a few days before the establishment of the Coordination of *intermittents* and precarious workers of the Île-de-France, the movement moved to another theatre in the east of Paris (la Colline).

The event is a source of desires and unknown beliefs in so far as by adding itself to the world, it must measure itself against what is already there and already instituted. The event and its effects add something to the world, and this can change what is already constituted. *Political action entails building the conditions for a transformation of what is, starting from the new possibilities contained in the event.* These conditions for the realisation of the possible are not identical to the conditions of its emergence, because the two are open to a process of subjectivation that re-orients action and changes power relations. Amongst the actual conditions of the world, some create obstacles; others are favourable to the realisation of these possibilities. Amongst the favourable conditions, some are already there; others must be invented and built; some others must be seized in the process of becoming of a social and political conjuncture. After the first moment of the event (its emergence), a second and problematic moment occurs: the possibilities that have emerged with the event must now actualise themselves in the existing state of affairs and subjectivity. [10]

Political experimentation today

The fall of the event back into history (the counter-action of the event) takes place at the crossroads of at least three different processes of singularisation: 1) the political struggle with different *dispositifs* of power (political, economic, media, welfare state etc.),

which in their turn manage to counter-act the event; 2) the political struggle between constituted political forces (unions, Trotskyists, communists, Maoists, etc.) and forces in the process of being constituted inside the movement itself (the Coordination), which is about meeting objectives, modes of organisation and struggle, building alliances, and implementing strategies; 3) the relation between this level of molar subjectivation and the processes of molecular subjectivation that emerges from working practices, unemployment, wage labour and the life of the *intermittents*. Each process of singularisation goes through irreversible points of bifurcation (using William James' notion) that determine their very dynamics.

In the weeks that followed June 26th, 2003, nearly every general assembly constituted a point of bifurcation where collective decisions determined irreversible choices that opened up some heterogeneous possibilities of struggle and organisation whilst closing others. In these meetings, had the 'communist hypothesis' as it was still put forward by communists, Trotskyists, and Maoists - a hypothesis that the 1970s movements had already strongly criticised and often liquidated - not been disowned, had the 'communist hypothesis' been able to impose itself, we would have had to deal with a very different movement, a completely different dynamic and process of subjectivation. In fact, we would have simply been confronted with the impossibility of a movement, because the political innovations that had made the movement powerful and ensured its durability would have been prevented. This communist hypothesis has few affinities with contemporary subjectivities and no longer represents a 'living hypothesis'. Rather, it is a 'dead hypothesis' where the movement has recuperated anything that can be necessary to the struggle.[11] The movement of *intermittents* deploys its political experimentation outside of the

classical communist hypothesis because it is forced to conceive of the relation between the molecular action of employment practices, unemployment, work and life and the molar action in the institutional public realm, as a relation between two levels of political subjectivation that are both distinct and inseparable, heterogeneous and yet communicative, rather than as a relation between the economy and politics.

The second movement of the event (its fall back into history) is very important as it is open to a process different from a simple verification: political experimentation does not bring about a faithfulness to the event, but rather something new, a social and political creation. The new nascent subjectivity must, on the one hand, change the conditions of employment, work, unemployment and the *dispositifs* of subjugation (to the wage, 'profession', 'artist') that it is enveloped in. On the other hand, it must introduce institutional changes (the 'rewriting' of unemployment welfare, democracy and its institutions, a new production of knowledge etc.). This is necessary not only to change its economic and political situation, but also, and above all, to open up spaces or build collective agencies capable of operating a 'subjective reconversion'.[12] In order to measure up against what is already there, for instance, labour rights, social security, the cultural labour market, assigned roles and functions, the democracy of institutions, it is necessary to immediately invent and build modes of saying and doing, modes of 'being together' (the desire to self-govern), and modes of 'being against' (the will not to be governed) adequate to the discontinuity introduced by the event.

The 'fall back' of the event into history and its inscription in the existing state of things determines a new political situation: the mode of this fall back, this inscription in a scene where it barges into social, economic and political institutions and subsequently

becomes integrated without friction, the mode in which it questions or legitimates the dominant 'discourse' on employment, unemployment and work, or the way in which it eventually defines 'these problems' otherwise, are all relevant to a 'political' struggle. These are questions of political strategy and tactic, of confrontation between heterogeneous points of view.

The 'fall back' of the event and the management of its effects, and the struggle over the meaning that is assigned to them are just as important as its emergence, and also seem to point to a more fundamental political question, because this fall back occurs in a time span that is normally unfavourable to movements: the long term of unions and political institutions, the term of the 'professionals' of politics, the time span of those who have time for politics. Starting from this question of the development of the event and history where history is no longer configured as a leading idea, as a guide to action, it might be possible to understand the deep crisis investing political action today, both its 'revolutionary' and 'democratic' forms.

We can draw some lessons from analysing the practices of the Coordination of the *intermittents* precisely because their political action is exercised through the development of the constitutive moments of the event: the condition or state of things from which it emerges, the new subjective and objective conditions it determines, and finally, the conditions to seize or construct in order to change the state of things and subjectivities. The three moments or temporalities of the event define three heterogeneous political situations that demand different treatments and modes of expression and action. The event is the condition or the occasion for a political 'constructivism' that the Coordination seems to have adopted.

The event, the world and subjectivity

The political event returns the world and subjectivity to us. It returns the world to its true nature: the world shows to those who have been opened and ripped apart by the event that it is not merely *what it is*, but something *in the course of making itself* and *something to be made*. The event gives us an open, unfinished, and incomplete world, and in so doing calls upon subjectivity because we can inscribe our actions and exercise our responsibility in this incompleteness, in this non-finitude.

The world in the process of making always requires an ethical perfection, always searches for an existential closure. In this sense, the opening of the event gives us access to the process of production and transformation of subjectivity. Like the world, individual and collective subjectivities are not given: they are in the process of making and open to be made. The event returns the world to us as a 'matter of choice', and subjectivity as a 'crossroad of *praxis*'. What is happening to me there? What can or should I do, and how to start from that place there? Am I responsible for what is going on? Am I responsible for what is going to happen? [13] The event makes subjectivity face alternatives, decisions, risks. With the event, one instantaneously goes from one world to the next, from one mode of struggle to another, where boundaries and meanings are not fully perceived but rather felt as being full of promises and challenges.

Choosing to invest and engage in the realisation of these promises and challenges entails reshuffling the old world (its old beliefs, desires, and routines) and creating with the new. In this sense, the event is a process of 'reconversion' or production of new subjectivity, that is to say, a reassessment of our own ways of

thinking and acting, an interrogation of our very existence. The world and subjectivity are not already given; everything is far from being decided, contrary to the discourse on 'the end of history' that has been repeated to us since the 1990s. The US State Department decreed that history ended when the Berlin wall fell, communism expired and the 'working class' became fragmented in a new sociology of social classes.[14] This talk of an 'end of history' proclaims that the possible does not overwhelm the real, but is equal to it: more precisely, the possible amounts to what is on offer on the market. The arrogance of the 'victors' states that any possible that is not already involved in the market does not exist. Therefore, our time is certainly not one of the end of history, but the time where we should pay attention to the way history acts in relation to what is not historical, the event, so long as it fails to trace the advancement of the world's destiny.

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[1] Alan Badiou, *Logics of worlds* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 44.

[2] On this point, see the first chapter of the present book, page 14.

[3] 'The force of conviction of Marx in the 19th century resides, in the 19th century, especially in the fact that it had folloed its liberal-bourgeois adversary on the economic terrain, and defeated it on the same terrain with its very weapons. This had been necessary

because the economic conversion was imposed by the economic victory of the industrial revolution.' Carl Schmitt, *Le Categorie del 'politico'* (Turin: Einaudi, 1972), 82.

[4] These changes become visible from the 1980s, but a careful observer could have detected them in the 1930s, following the example of Carl Schmitt, for whom the clear and univocal distinctions of the Classical Age (between the economy, politics, the State, war, peace, etc.) no longer applied, since State and society now permeated one another.

[5] For a definition of molar and molecular, see footnote 13 of this book.

[6] Michel Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres. Le courage de la vérité* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 169.

[7] The ethics of the care of the self and others has nothing to do with the 'good' life of Hannah Arendt, because in the tradition of the Cynics, Christianity and revolutionary modernity, Foucault retraces the history of 'a life that is scandalously other' and poses 'the otherness of another life, not simply as the choice of a different life, blessed and sovereign, but as the practice of a combativeness at the threshold of which lies another world'. Michel Foucault, *Le gouvernment*, 264.

[8] Unlike other political organised forces, the PAP had the wisdom to 'disband' in the Coordination.

[9] Félix Guattari, *L'inconscient machinique* (Paris: Éditions Recherches, 1979), 242.

[10] Interlaces of history and the event do not feature in Rancière, because the event only comes after a 'formal' analysis, where it is

never a question of capitalism as it functions, as it changes, and as we are subjected to. The event is conceived of as a suspension that can be thought in history. It is sufficient for it to keep to the formal conditions of the 'syllogism of equality' (the legality of speaking men who make demands of the presupposed power: the major of the syllogism - and the inequality (or wrong) that the same power establishes with its statement: the minor of the syllogism). But if the event only occurs through history, it no longer returns to it, in the sense that it always guards the splendour of its non-actualisable and eternal side, and reduces the political to the glorious emergence of the act of subjectivation. The 'idealism' of Badiou is even more radical, because for him, 'History does not exist. There are only disparate presents', in his caricatured analysis of the powers in struggle (not better described as 'workers'). See Alain Badiou, *The Logic of Worlds* (London: Continuum, 2009).

[11]For William James, the (living or dead) hypothesis is confronted with the 'will to act that it provokes'. To say that a hypothesis is more or less living depending on its ability to irrevocably incline someone towards action, see *The Will to Believe* (Dover: Dover Publications, 2003).

[12] 'When a political movement comes about, it is not sufficient to adjust the economic and political situation to respond to the effects of events. Society must be able to bring about institutional changes that correspond to this new subjectivity, and facilitate the subjective reconversion at the collective level, with the transformation of the state of things'. Deleuze, *Deux regimes de fous,* 217.

[13] This is how Guattari formulates the question of an ethics of singularity in the interview “Vertige de l’immanence”, *Chimeres*, n. 38 (2000): 22.

[14] Francis Fukuyama, author of *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), has been a member of the Policy Planning Staff of the US State Department.