Nihilism and the Deconstruction of Time: Notes toward Infrapolitics

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How do we stand with respect to nihilism? Perhaps Oliver Marchart's book *Post-Foundational Political Thought* (2007) is not a bad place to start when considering this question, even if in a preliminary fashion. His book is, among other things, an attempt to separate Leftist-Heideggerian theorists (including Jean-Luc Nancy, Alain Badiou, Claude Lefort and Ernesto Laclau) from the charge of nihilism that is usually leveled at approaches that posit the absence of a final or foundational ground, whether it is in terms of politics or philosophy. He cites Laclau's words to this effect:

> there are no necessarily pessimistic or nihilistic conclusions to be drawn from the dissolution of the foundationalist horizon . . . As Laclau underlines, the "abandonment of the myth of foundations does not lead to nihilism . . ." since the "dissolution of the myth of foundations . . . further radicalizes the emancipatory possibilities offered by the Enlightenment and Marxism." (156)

What is odd about this particular defense against the accusation of nihilism is that the theory of post-foundationalism is predicated first and foremost on what Heidegger called the ontological difference. And in Heidegger's own thought, we find that taking the ontological difference seriously would make it impossible to treat the problem of nihilism as a mere pitfall that can be avoided or as an obstacle that can be simply surpassed—for nihilism must instead be thought in its essence and thought must first learn how to gather itself in the nothing that it is (see "On the Question of Being" Heidegger 291-322). Marchart, on the contrary, states that nihilism, which for him is another name for anti-foundationalism, is the assumption of the absence of foundations, even if one thinks of foundations as a contingent and partial. And according to him, this "would result in complete meaninglessness" (14). Marchart's project is geared toward avoiding such an abyss.

My aim here is not to delve into the intricacies of the theory of post-foundationalism as Marchart's elaborates it, but his insistence on sidestepping the problem of nihilism does serve to illustrate one of the recurrent symptoms of the incursion into politics of the

question of being. In Marchart's case, the basic problem remains: how to accept the deconstruction of metaphysics while remaining politically relevant. All answers to this problem that leave the very idea of politics and its temporalities untouched (even while declaring that the political is contingent, finite and ultimately without ground) risk reproducing the very metaphysical matrix that they explicitly critique. In the limited space that I have, I do not pretend to offer an image of what a different conception of politics would be; I simply want to elaborate on certain problems that are essential in approaching that question.

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One way of illustrating the underlying problematic behind the question of foundations for politics is by turning to the work of Carl Schmitt. It is well known that Schmitt defines the sovereign as "he who decides on the exception" (Schmitt 5). In turn, the exception, he states, is principally characterized by "unlimited authority," and this "means the suspension of the entire existing order;" he adds: "In such a situation it is clear that the state remains, whereas law recedes. Because the exception is different from anarchy and chaos, order in the juristic sense still prevails even if it is not of the ordinary kind" (12). The state is above the law, and this superiority has nothing to do with its anarchic or chaotic character. For the exception to be intelligible in the first place, there must be a normal situation. Thus, another definition of the sovereign is in order: he who "decides whether this normal situation actually exists" (13). Since "there exists no norm that is applicable to chaos," the entire apparatus of sovereignty according to the political theological model is to begin by legislating the anarchic and the chaotic, the formless and the ab-normal, out of existence (13). This stratum becomes a nothingness that stands in opposition to the all that is nevertheless divided into two: the situation and the exception. The an-archic is vanished, but only because it is taken over and domesticated by the act of decision, which is the only absolute principle—but a principle that, precisely because it is a decision, cannot be an *arché*. This displacement is at the heart of the contradictory dynamic that Schmitt's sovereign enacts: he constructs by destroying, determines by in-determining, forms by deconstructing (Galli *Genealogia* 338). "Authority," Schmitt writes, "to produce law . . . need not be based on law" (Schmitt 13).

Carlo Galli has pointed out the extent to which we are dealing here with an abyss that is proper to the crisis of modern political thought, and which leaves the order that the

sovereign is able to produce haunted by its diametrical opposite: "Through this creation of form and of order the sovereign draws energy from disorder itself, from the exception; neither is this abyssal act given once and for all, rather disorder and exception remain, within the order, as an always present potential" (Galli, *Genealogia* 339). It is tempting to imagine that this problem emerges only with the demise of the Christian social mediation. However, this would obscure the fact that the Christian mediation, and before that the Imperial Roman mediation (with its law and its *humanitas*), and before that . . . we could keep tracking this crisis all the way back to the most fragmentary of pre-Socratic remains we have at our disposal—all of these steps back are iterations of the same attempt at domesticating the nothingness from which order emerges**.** Galli puts it thus:

> The modern rationalist project (Lockian, Enlightened, Positivist) of making politics turn upon the individual, of turning the political mandate into an impersonal and legal function, and of rendering politics transparent and in continuity with the rationality of the subject, according to Schmitt's text, is shipwrecked: in order for a rational and impersonal order to have normative validity there must be a personal, prelegal and prerational mandate, founded on that normative Void that is the decision. (Galli, *La mirada* 65)

Galli immediately adds that Schmitt is not a nihilist on this score, but he must come to terms with Modern nihilism: "with the absence of foundation" (Galli, *La mirada* 65). In Schmitt, there is the recognition that "the only possibility of something concrete in the modern age lies in the awareness of nihilism and the opposition to its formal concealment, that is, the merely formal . . . determination of the political order" (Galli, *La mirada* 65). Modern political existence, for Schmitt, is defined by this founding absence, this Void-of-Order. This lack is the decision, and assuming it as the unfounded foundation of the law is the only way to be "scientific" regarding the Modern situation. In this Schmitt assumes, on the one hand, that order is necessary, but impossible to realize it perfectly; and, on the other, that this is a historically specific situation. The only way to face this moment is by remembering and activating the remembrance that the public order emerges from the contingent. This understanding of the lack of foundations, and not a Heideggerian approach based on the problem of the ontological difference, seems to be more attuned to the elaboration that Marchart makes of post-foundationalism. For the Heideggerian approach to the ontological difference, as Emmanuel Biset has shown in his own reading of Marchart's book, cannot be

reduced to the dualism of an ontic politics and an ontological realm of the political without welcoming back the classical metaphysical matrix and its foundationalist thought (on this point see Biset).

Even a cursory description of Marchart's approach to foundations reveals closer affinities with Schmitt than with Heidegger. He explains that, since it is not an easy task to get rid of foundations altogether, post-foundational thought pays closer attention to "what is excluded by the erection of foundations;" these contingent foundations are "an ontological weakening" of foundations that does not go all the way to doing away with them—and adds:

What distinguishes [anti-foundationalism from post-foundational thought is that the latter] does not assume the absence of *any* ground; what it assumes is the absence of *an ultimate* ground, since it is only on the basis of such absence that grounds, in the plural, are possible. . . . Hence, post-foundationalism does not stop after having assumed the absence of a final ground . . . for what is still accepted by post-foundationalism is the necessity of *some* grounds. What becomes problematic as a result is not the existence of foundations (in the plural) but their ontological status—which is seen now as necessarily contingent. (14)

There is a shift involved that turns the attention away from the object and toward its conditions of possibility. This operation has been called transcendental by Laclau, but I want to ask whether it is, properly speaking, a metaphysical operation as well. The fate of any possible "Left-Heideggerianism" is at issue in this question. For it is by taking the ontological difference (between being and beings) that this operation is said to be possible in the first place. As Marchart puts it, "at stake in post-foundationalist thought is the status attributed to foundations, whereby the primordial (or ontological) absence of an ultimate ground is itself the condition of possibility of grounds as present—that is, in their objectivity or empirical 'existence' as ontic beings" (15). Against thinkers that dismiss the relevance of the ontological difference (like Rancière, Rorty, or Oakeshott), this understanding of ontological difference *qua* difference is essential for post-foundationalism. A plurality of contingent and temporary foundations ground the social field empirically, but it remains impossible to find a final ground for that plurality. To hold these two ideas together at once is to admit that the impossibility of the final ground "cannot be of the same order as empirical foundations themselves" (15). The absence of *archê* ends up being the very legitimating mechanism for the multiplication of finite foundations, which will take on the form of a decision—as was the case also in Schmitt. The empirical order must then be able

to posit its own finite principle. It is not universal, and it is openly accepted as contingent, but it remains a principle. And what makes it possible is the transcendental absence of an ultimate principle.

We can think this description not as post-foundationalism, but as a thoroughly secularized version of the transcendence and rescendence that obtains when the location of value(s) is no longer above but here on Earth. As such, it can be used as a description of what "modernity" or "enlightenment" actually were supposed to be even as it is with modernity and the enlightenment that this operation becomes the basic ideological matrix for a disembodied and unlocalized universalism that we know today to have been in crisis since its very inception. Would this not then mean that post-foundationalism is simply a rehabilitated form of modern thought as a whole? If this is so, then post-foundationalism "attends" to the ontological difference the better to forget about being, in Heidegger's sense of the term. But more generally, what is at issue in this forgetting has a very specific political consequence: this flattening out of the ontological difference prepares the way for the accusation of nihilism to be leveled at whoever does not forget what is essentially at issue in thinking the difference between being and beings as difference and not as a stratification of "ontic" and "ontological" "levels."

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The accusation of nihilism is not made today primarily as the condemnation of a lack of faith in a concept of politics that is easily traced back to its metaphysical legacy, even if it is couched in post-foundational gestures such as we have explored in the case of Marchart. Take the following as a starting point: "In *Being and Event*, Badiou diagnoses . . . active nihilism as 'speculative leftism,' the belief in the absolute event that all too easily folds over into accepting the unalterable reign of power" (Noys 160). This folding over turns belief in an absolute event into the disbelief that will obtain in the case of all "real" events, as there is no such thing as an absolute event to begin with. Badiou writes of speculative leftism as the belief that it is possible to commence from nothing, and he cites Nietzsche and the belief that it is possible "to break in two the history of the world" (Badiou, *Being and Event* 210). But again, this is imagined by this doctrine as the preparation for disbelief in all events that do take place, events that take on a more dialectical and less pure form. Thus the accusation of nihilism is bounced back to those forms of thinking that have attempted to think through the problem of nihilism, but now with the added caveat that nihilism is what these theories

themselves produce and not anything that describes the state of humanity in whatever sense we wish to give to that expression. The result is striking as the fight against nihilism continues, but it is now a fight against those who think the problem. The banality of nihilism must be dismissed or critiqued.

Justin Clemens, in his Badiou-inflected *The Romanticism of Contemporary Theory*, has shown to what extent, within Badiou's doctrine, this means to identify nihilism with anti-Platonist trends from Nietzsche and the Romantics down to the various deconstructions of metaphysics that are loosely collected under the heading of "theory":

> Romanticism is obsessed with the problem of nihilism, which it often codes as "Platonism." The abiding force of the problem is such that its effects can be discerned across an immense range of contemporary theory—and even in writers who may seem hostile or indifferent to nihilism's appeal. Furthermore, the problem of nihilism is irreducibly bound up with the problem of aesthetics. For Romantics, art is the non-place in which the historical distress of the world is best discerned and analyzed, although by no means resolved. (194-95)

The problem of nihilism, Clemens concludes, can be circumscribed to a series of philosophical or theoretical theses: concerning "irreducible multiplicity and subjective finitude, the necessity to delineate the end of metaphysics, the rejection of technoscience, and so on" (195). In "The Caesura of Nihilism," Badiou sheds light as to what is the bottom line in this sort of proposition in terms of a materialist concept of politics. So long as philosophy is critique, fixated on exposing the finitude that haunts every Idea, we are active nihilists; for "philosophy has no other legitimate aim except to help find the new names that will bring into existence the unknown world that is only waiting for us because we are waiting for it" (Badiou, *The Adventure of French Philosophy* 65). The new world has to be named by philosophy, this is its political task. Anything else would be to call for the nihilistic disenchantment of all hitherto existing values and a call to inaction.

Commenting on this identification of nihilism with the inactive and impolitical, Bruno Bosteels has asserted that any effort to link this to a progressive or leftist agenda would have to contend with Geoff Waite's indictment of Left-Nietzscheanism (Bosteels *Actuality,* 123-24). Though it is not a matter of proving one's progressive or leftists credentials, it is worthwhile to take Bosteels up on this suggestion—not because in the end a

true theory of the Left will emerge, but because it will shed light on the way that politics, as such, has taken up the place of the highest value and has thus been theologically inflected in order to defend it from the corrosive effects of so-called nihilist thought. Bosteels does not point to any specific place when citing Waite, but one could do worse than this passage:

Historical arguments linking Nietzsche positively to "the Left" can be compromised by demanding that the historians who make them define what they mean by "the Left"—a term that too often means a cowardly liberalism that has been more part of the *problem* of the relationship between liberalism and not only the welfare state—"bourgeois democracy at its maximum"—than any *solution* to it. A powerful, even fascistoid-liberal tendency has long been more in league with Nietzsche's corps/e than in effective combat against it. (Waite 145)

Basically the issue is with any theory that by its radical critique will fall into a tacit or unwitting defense of the status quo. Nietzsche is a revolutionary thinker for Waite, but a revolutionary in what sense? He finds his answer in what he considers "*the* most significant moment in all Nietzsche criticism," that is, Stanley Rosen's "Nietzsche's Revolution." In Nietzsche, Rosen writes: "An appeal to the highest, most gifted human individuals to create a radically new society of artist-warriors was expressed with rhetorical power and a unique mixture of *frankness and ambiguity* in such a way as to allow the mediocre, the foolish, and the mad to regard themselves as the divine prototypes of the highest men of the future." And, as Rosen concludes this part of this argument, "Nietzsche intends to accelerate the process of self-destruction intrinsic to modern 'progress,' not to encourage a return to some kind of idyllic past. The more persons who can be convinced that they are modern progressives (or postmoderns), the quicker the explosion." In short, "Nietzsche is a revolutionary of the right in his radical aristocratism and antiegalitarianism," *but* he needs the willing cooperation of a workforce in this bizarre, even murderous and suicidal project. Furthermore, Nietzsche seems to have *succeeded*, for Rosen, at least in part and negatively: namely, "in enlisting countless thousands in the ironical task of self-destruction." (Waite 166)

Waite leaves the apocalyptic Christianization of Nietzsche that this reading implies unremarked. It is telling that to arrive at this long citation, which settles his argument for the moment, the author has to spend so much energy touting the need for a proper philological reading of Nietzsche's text. He faults people like Richard Rorty for not having read deeply enough in the work of Northrop Frye. Likewise, Heidegger, Lukács and Freud, among an overwhelming number of others (since for Waite Nietzsche is the philosopher of the

contemporary world, the most influential on a global scale, the dominant ideologue in the context of the *pax americana*), all of them, according to Waite, simply ignore the philological question of method when appropriating the texts of the German philosopher. Philology, then, is opposed to hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, we are told (via Sorel as cited in Rosen and reported by Waite), entails an expression "of middle-class fear of the violent and repressive nature of truth . . . a cowardice which consists in always surrendering before the threat of violence;" and for the author this indicates that hermeneutics is "condemned to death" and that "its disappearance is only a matter of time" (163). Philology, on the contrary, has a more Gramscian connotation for Waite: not only as a practice of communist scholarship, but also a practice of communist action beyond the academy. Gramsci's "living philology" is, for Waite, the "highest possible standard against which to judge any text" (79, cf. 145-66). The current appropriation of this argument, goes under the guise of an attack on the melancholy leanings of a putative self-defeatist Left that prevents the revolution by its fixation on failure and its unwillingness to produce the new world that is waiting for us. [1]

Perhaps the most important recent incarnation of this philological imperative is the claim that "theory" or "postmetaphysical" thought is today a major hurdle against the promise of a better world, even serving as the philosophical equivalent of savage capitalism and its democratic processes (see Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* 262). Yet, if "'finitude' has today become a dogma that risks keeping the empirical form being internally transformed" (Bosteels, "Translator's Introduction" xxvii), perhaps it is not of a "dogma" that we are talking about in the first place. On the one hand, this position assumes that "the revolution," or the "new world," is prevented from coming into being by the perhaps unwitting speculative efforts of certain theorists—that is, it seems to throw the political field onto the desk of the philosopher/theorist up to a point. On the other, it wants to offer a dialectical recasting of the very opposition between theory and praxis in which theory is no longer the work of leaders separated from the masses, or philosophers in a position external to actual emancipatory political sequences. Thus, the work of the masses themselves, the work, that is, that goes on in those actually existing political sequences, has to be displaced from a purely practical consideration and reimagined as dialectically engaged in the production of both theory and of a torsion or change within the historical situation as such. This shift is not a merely theoretical move, for it has been achieved "as an effort of the intellect of the masses" themselves:

> Political movements, in other words, are also and at the same time theoretical acts; conversely, all theoretical or philosophical configurations are likewise to be read as political interventions—say, as diagnostics or as prognosis, whether overt or esoteric. But the crucial point not to be missed is that these insights are but two sides of the same coin. Otherwise we risk smuggling in through the back door the straw man's argument that we thought we kicked out of the front door, namely, the dichotomy of theory and practice. (Bosteels, "The Efficacy" 661)

And further:

> To protest is to know; to know is to transform; and to learn is to be controversial. If the theorists are the masses themselves, instead of the vanguard leadership detached from them, then this is what theorists are for in times of riots and distress. ("The Efficay" 662)

It is impossible, given the aim of this paper, to retrace all of the subtle and complex theoretical footwork that has to take place for this dialectic to make sense. Nevertheless, several remarks are in order to understand what is at stake both in Bosteels and in what I am proposing in these pages. We could start with the idea that for Bosteels, following Badiou, the main interlocutor here is Left-Heideggerianism, a loose label that is some times applied to Badiou himself. For our purposes here what is important to underscore is that Left-Hedeggerianism is meant to designate those thinkers for whom the work of Heidegger is a fundamental point of departure, but who ultimately assume that in Heidegger there is no answer to the question "What is to be done?," and thus no useful link between theory and praxis. What results is a theorization of the social that sees in it the appearance of an unstable or un-founded totality, always precarious and always contingent. The attempt to close this gap, so the argument goes, would result in terror. For Bosteels, this radicalization of the Heideggerian principle of anarchy, the unpresentable void at the heart of all ontic phenomena, remains unable to give a satisfactory answer to the problem of theory and praxis. It leaves the theorists in a very traditional position; according to Bosteels, "the philosophy of radical democracy rarely exceeds the frame of traditional political philosophy, in as much as it is still a question of deliberating the uses and disadvantages of different modes of organizing society. In other words, it judges politics from outside . . . starting from a necessary comparison of various types of symbolic ordering" (*Badiou and Politics,* 270).

This externality is no less unacceptable than the relative externality of theory when compared to the isolated and autonomous praxis of the militant, according to which theory only happens in the streets. The dialectical relation between theory and praxis, if it is to avoid the adventurism of ultra and speculative leftistism, involves two tasks that go to the heart of Bosteels's proposal. The first is to provide an ontology of actuality, or of the present, which Bosteels associates with Foucault, but ultimately defines as the theoretical task of mapping the events "whose configuration marks our present;" the second is to cover over the void that so-called anarchic poststructuralist thought makes so much of, in order to define the subject of truth capable of transforming that empty space itself (269). Or, in other words, the task is to define the present and to find the subject of truth that will be able to transform it according to a universal prescription—as opposed to a contingent hegemonic articulation without ultimate grounds.

The reference to Foucault is more than a little odd here, particularly as it is set aside right away in the name of a more Badiouian formulation regarding events. In Foucault, the ontologies of the present had more to do with exposing the contingency at the heart of any present circumstance, precisely because it is one of the traditional metaphysical moves to assign the status of necessity to what is present—a status that goes straight to the heart of the principle of reason. In Bosteels as well, the contingent is meant to emphasize the fact that what is present is not necessary and can therefore be transformed in a radical way consistent with emancipatory politics. But the principle of reason creeps back in with the suggestion that it is possible for theory to offer a univocal representation of what the present is. And this brings us back to the issue of an answer to the question "what is to be done?" The possibility of an answer to this question is tied necessarily to the possibility of knowing what the present is. As soon as a clear picture of what the present is appears, there also appears a set of consequences as to what needs to be done. However, the problem is how this picture emerges in the first place, and whether it is possible for it to emerge without returning to the most traditional philosophical grounds. But even beyond the more philosophical questions, it would be an issue that affects the most trivial organizational principals in constructing our critical arguments. For instance, is what defines our present the fact of a "deep unity" between post-metaphysical thought and the structure of the market? (262). However subtle the qualifications one adduces in making this reduction, the fact that it can be seen as an instance of reductionism, at the very least, exposes the

impossibility of defining and representing the present except as a subjective wager regarding what is and is not actual, or is actual only from a certain perspective. This is the subject that displaces the void, the subject of truth, the subject of revolution. To be in disagreement with that subject about what the present is, means to be a reactionary subject; a subject unwilling or unable to believe in the truth professed by the militant subject. It would be tempting to invoke here the current commonplaces about how disagreement as such is what lies at the heart of politics, and to say, for instance, that the present is neither one side nor the other but the tension that the disagreement sustains, and thus that the present is the multiplicity of presents that are therefore configured. But this would be simply to multiply and complicate the requirements necessary to fully delineate what the present actually is. What I submit is that the real issue lies in the impossibility of giving form to the present and that this impossibility can only be overcome by sheer voluntarism and reductionism. This means that, up to a point, I am in agreement with Bosteels's critique of Left-Heideggerianism, in so far as what he says can also be read as a diagnosis that the necessary absence of foundations of the social often, as was explained in the pages above with regard to Marchart's proposal, substitutes for or acts as yet another foundation with which to cover over the an-archic at the heart of the political. But if the Left-Heideggerians do this unwittingly, Bosteels does it fully conscious that it is ultimately a question of displacing and forgetting the void. That is, the issue of the forgetting of being, in the twenty first century is no longer a question of what has gone unthought, but of a willing forgetfulness that is justified in the name of making the work of politics easier. And its first task is to dismiss all that the theorist knows about the difficult and treacherous traditional philosophical baggage regarding the presence of the present for thought. But the here and now, particularly after Hegel, does not let itself be pried open in this form.

However dialectically mediated, the theory/praxis dyad remains completely folded into an epistemological search for ultimate foundations, the final ground, from which knowledge is obtained. That is, the dialectic of theory and praxis remains wholly within epistemology itself. But it also posits that nihilism is the measure of the distance staked out from the non-melancholic proper Left that defines what the "here and now" are, which is to say, the distance that separates critique from true politics as the highest value. Furthermore, by pointing out the obstacle that the melancholic poses to this highest value, the true progressive does nothing other than unwittingly underscore the finitude of what he or she

assumes to be the correct political path. For, one cannot kill god as if it were a choice; not even Nietzsche made such an extravagant claim. The void at the heart of the political has little to do with a proverbial theoretical pudding[2] that is offered and can therefore be accepted or rejected as if it were a matter of choice. This void is not an aesthetic or imagined supplement, it is the first evidence of modern political experience, particularly after the great political revolutions of the era. That is, it is not a conservative gap installed in order to dismiss or discredit the emancipatory energy of the militant, it is what the militant, unaware of all its consequences, first exposed in saying that the King was not a necessary feature of the social landscape. And that his beheading, far from being a catastrophe, was the only way of making life more bearable. But the void does not pick sides; the day after the revolution that void is also there already gnawing at whatever new institutions are put in place. The paradox of historical materialism is that it is unable to come to terms with the materiality of this emptiness. And this is the central paradox of nihilism today. From the point of view of our contemporary radical thinkers, to confront the void that revolutions made fully manifest in the political field immediately turns you into a nihilist, as our contemporary revolutionary theorists seem to see in anyone willing to look into the abyss only the black sheep that run away from the Good Sheppard.

But it would be a mistake to think that this is only a question of/for the Left. In fact, it would be possible to show the extent to which an approach labeled Left-Nietzschean, or Left-Heideggerian, or even Left-anti-Platonist, which is to say the thought of the displacement of politics as a category of metaphysics, appears today as the enemy and nihilist adversary across a wide ideological spectrum. This is not because it is always the same concept of the political that is at issue, but because politics is placed in the same structural place: as the highest value against which nihilism is measured. For the moment, I will call the dislocation of that site the task of infrapolitical deconstruction. But my aim here is to show the extent to which its disavowal operates under the guise of a defense against nihilist thought.

The same fundamental gesture reappears in the neo-communism of contemporary theory. Bosteels, quoting Badiou, states: "contemporary nihilism . . . consists . . . in defining the Good only negatively by way of the need to avoid Evil. 'Evil is that from which the Good is derived, not the other way round,' as Badiou writes in his diagnosis of the ethical turn. 'Nietzsche demonstrated very neatly that humanity prefers to will nothingness rather

than to will nothing at all. I will reserve the name nihilism for this will to nothingness, which is like a counterpart of blind necessity'" (*Marx and Freud* 68). A proper leftist politics will only emerge upon the eradication of all that, fixated on willing nothingness, prevents the real transformation of the present alienation. This is a program that he outlines in the closing section of *The Actuality of Communism* (2011), where he emphasizes the need for the proper progressive left to recognize "an eternal or ahistorical kernel" that "would open up the possibility of changing the very terrain upon which history plays itself out" (*The Actuality* 278). The dualism of an ontological and an ontic stratification of different levels that need somehow to be linked is already at work here, though not under the banner of post-foundationalism. Yet it is from the same premises that the tasks for theory in the current situation should be decided according to Bosteels. For him, the first would be writing "a history of communist eternity," "that of the different aleatory sequences of the communist hypothesis in a strict immanent determination;" the second, communism "must also be actualized and organized as the real movement that abolishes the present state of things" (*The Actuality* 278). On the first count, Bosteels argues against a linear logic of necessary stages, and in effect paraphrases the basic premise of the theory of the event in Badiou: that an event emerges in a situation and not out of nothingness (to think so is the mistake of speculative lefism, and thus of nihilism, according to this theory); on the second, while assuming that the left as a whole would want to adopt the name communism as its own, he admits that all the fights and disagreements of the left would concern what one understands by that particular embodiment and organization of communist politics (the party, or the state—the negation of both—or the multitude, and so forth), and it is in this latter acrimonious zone that subjectivity emerges. Elsewhere, Bosteels has commented on the difficulties of producing the new man, with reference to the case of Cuba in particular, and of how it cannot be by way of eliminating the old in view of the new, whether it is a bourgeois subject that needs to become revolutionary or a religious one that needs to be secularized. In fact, these two kinds of subjectivity appear as two dimensions of the same problem, as a true emancipatory politics would entail traveling "down the road to the religious alienation that lies at the root of political and economic alienation" (*Marx and Freud* 122). The time of such a subject would have to be a new subjective present (Badiou, *Logics of Worlds. Being and Event II* 51); but then the world this subject occupies and transforms would have to be somewhere in between, in transition, both in order to maintain the requirement

of immanence and to avoid the Christian carryover of a subject that simply destroys an old self.

The image that best captures the crossroads of time that this assumes is that of the horizon, which is derived from the rhetoric of Bolivian vice-president Álvaro García Linera.[3] The actual body that incarnates the idea-in-history will have to declare that the horizon is not actual (this is patently clear from García Linera's statement), whereas the theorists that appropriate this horizon need to re-mark it as the actuality of the present:

> This and nothing else is what the invocation of the communist horizon is meant to produce or render actual once again: a complete shift in perspective, or a radical ideological turnabout, as a result of which capitalism no longer appears as the only game in town and we no longer have to be ashamed to set our expecting and desiring eyes here and now on a different organization of social relationships. (Bosteels, *Actuality* 228)

So far, this is the horizon of the present of a subject faithful to the communist hypothesis. Since that subject is here-and-now the hypothesis of communism is also here-and-now: it is an actual body that is present. But this means, at the same time, that the non-communist situation, the world that has to be transformed, in which this subject emerges, and the now of the subjective wager coexist. Furthermore, that situation is then touched by a temporality that is beginning to blur the line between history and eternity more and more. Bosteels, citing Jodie Dean, states: "Horizon: . . . tags not a lost future but a dimension of experience we can never lose, even if, lost in a fog or focused on our feet, we fail to see it. The horizon is Real not just in the sense of impossible—we can never reach it—but also in the sense of the actual format, condition, and shape of our setting (and I take both these senses of Real to be Lacanian);" Jodi Dean explains in her own riff on the notion of the communist horizon that she also borrows from García Linera. "We can lose our bearings, but the horizon is a necessary condition or shaping of our actuality. Whether the effect of a singularity or the meeting of earth and sky, the horizon is the fundamental division establishing where we are." (*The Actuality* 228)

If this dimension of experience we can never lose is not an impossible illusion, that impossible to reach line where earth and sky meet, but the condition for shaping our actuality, why then resort to the image of the horizon? Of course, one pays homage to García Linera by doing so, but in his own formulation the image had rather different

connotations:

> The general horizon of the era is communist. . . . But at this moment it is clear that this is not an immediate horizon, which centers on the conquest of equality, the redistribution of wealth, the broadening of rights . . . that is . . . as far as social forces allow us to go . . . We enter the movement with our expecting and desiring eyes set upon the communist horizon. But we were serious and objective, in the social sense of the term, by signaling the limits of the movement. (Cited in Bosteels, *The Actuality*, 226-27)

Horizon here entails a movement toward something that is to come, which will have to be constructed. If this is a stage-ist reading of the passage, which Bosteels dismisses as inappropriate, then what emerges when it is read by the new Communism begins to sound and look more like the not-so-new and only questionably communist temporal image of classical or orthodox vulgar Marxism-Leninism. For what the passage states is that "the movement" has to be properly formed—given its "limitations"—by a very serious "we" that knows better.

Perhaps it is time to reconsider the problem of foundations from the perspective of the ex nihilo without any further qualifications, that is, from the perspective a thoroughly a-principial thought. That the non-foundation of change is always the void would then mean that no political praxis/thought would be able to avail itself of necessary reason, even if this reason returns in the form of a stable, though contingent, image of the present. The precariousness of this praxis/thought would constitute the edge or the border between what forms and unforms it at every turn. This proposal does not require that we delimit the proper space of literature, politics, science and so on with every putative autonomous region as separate conditions for thought. But we would need to frame the problem some ways beyond the columns that cordon off the romantic legacy that has most often been associated with the formless, the sublime, and the tragic, as so many instances of the void that structures the whole even in its vanishing. Derrida's work on Hegel can be of help on this front. I want to conclude by turning to *Glas*, in the hopes of showing that the impossibility of giving a strong answer to the question "what is to be done?" is not the result of a weak or melancholic subject in love with defeat, but the upshot of a more general impossibility to give form and define what the present is. In the end, what makes revolution, change, transformation, possible is the very thing that wrests the possibility of the new from the

realm of a subjective choice, and also from the field defined by the relation between theory and praxis.

4

Derrida recounts: in absolute religion, such as Hegel understands it, separation or division is not overcome by reconciliation. The opposition remains as a representation that anticipates the ultimate truth, and hence the essential content of this representation remains external. The object in question is present, but remains outside and ahead. The subject for whom this representation appears cannot be one with its object in the now, and the reconciliation has to wait (Derrida *Glas* 219, I always cite from the column on Hegel). If this is what obtains prior to the Hegelian synthesis (the sublation of religion into speculative philosophy), it would serve to mark the limit of a pre-Hegelian modernity. So long as this exteriority remains, we are somewhere prior to absolute knowledge. By the same token, we would be in a zone where time, which would be defined as the representative exteriority itself, would be caught in the realm of objective necessity, nothing to be done to it, almost impossible to even notice it. Derrida sums this up in a single sentence: "Religion is representative because it needs time" (220). Let us mark, in passing, that any political praxis of subjectivity that has not yet produced its anticipated end result (e.g., communism) would come to occupy the place religion does here: it would have to be representative because it would need time. But occupying the same place that religion occupies before and after the formalization of Absolute Knowledge has its consequences. Namely, that the time of separation must be turned around, it must be "actualized and organized as the real movement that abolishes the present state of things . . . [and] find inscription in a concrete body " (Bosteels, *The Actuality* 239). Separation would then be: that which is being destroyed by the actuality of that which is not yet here but as horizon. The age that places itself under the sign of the *Aufhebung*, modernity since Hegel, is forced to produce the historicization of eternity by pitting its horizon-al actuality against a present it needs to destroy, a present it sets out to transform, even as this present is only available as its own theoretical projection, it own theoretical fiction. We are talking about the crossroads of religion and revolution, but also about the formalization of a stable present that can be handled so as to transform it, as if time were at hand, given in the form of an object here and now.

Moreover, the mere surpassing of this exteriority would only yield a further complication. If, as Hegel points out in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Absolute Knowledge is at

once a deletion and a relief of time, what obtains is a "barely existing limit, exceeded as soon as it is posited," which "is already no more what it is yet and does not even give time to think its time. This limit is what barely presents itself between absolute religion and *Sa* [Absolute Knowledge]" (Derrida 220). Everything hinges on the strategic interpretation one makes of this deletion and relief of time, and any possible idea regarding a post-Hegelian modernity depends on it.

Absolute Knowledge, then, as the passage from representation to presence, produces the being by itself of the logos, its unveiled essence. Derrida calls this the final accomplishment of the phantasm: "The absolute phantasm: *Sa*" (225). And he asks: "what can there be outside an absolute phantasm? What can one yet add to it? Why and how does one desire to get out of it?" He follows these questions thus: "It is necessary to give oneself time;" but what kind of time, when the concept itself seems to be what makes it so difficult to imagine any thought of an outside in the first place? Derrida adds: not the time that remains, but "Time's remains(s)" (225, 226). The difficulty lies in:

> Trying to think . . . a remain(s) of time . . . that would not come under a present, under a mode of being or presence, and that consequently would fall outside the circle of Sa, [but] would not fall from it as its negative, as a negative sound . . . The remain(s), it must be added, would not fall from it at all. Everything that falls (to the tomb) in effect yet comes under [releve du] Sa. (226)

Derrida opened *Glas* by observing that the words "here" and "now" are for us citations—and that we will have learned this from Hegel (1). Considered as citation, the question of "here-now" can nevertheless be staged, the better to go in the direction of "that element of the scene which exceeds representation" (Derrida *Points* 11). What is at issue here then is a question concerning the possibility of time beyond any synthetic representation of it, yes, but the crucial point is not the aesthetic proposition of the theorist struggling with Hegel, but that the only way of avoiding the mere substitution of one foundation or absolute ground by another depends on the possibility of assuming the here and now only as citation, as a theoretical fiction which envelops us almost to the point of blindness, but which can nevertheless be staged so as to confront its fictionality, however obliquely. It makes no difference if this substitution of the foundation takes on the mask of the void or the form of the willful forgetting of the emptiness that haunts all institutions. What is at issue is therefore

not merely to posit the vanguard notion of a post-metaphysical time, again as if it were simple a question of inventing a new idea. What is at stake is, rather, that the possibility of confronting the truth of what is given, to be a materialist in the most righteous sense of that useless word, is to find a way to think the "fact" of this "thing" which is time beyond form, the nothing from which history is made.[4]

The infrapolitical perspective is always pointing to this "fact." And it does not say to the militant or the radical thinker you have to accept the categorical imperative that everything comes to an end. The infrapolitical perspective only points out: *you want your present defined and delimited so as to know what needs to be done; and you only find a formless mess which escapes your reach.* If "the present" does not yield to the phantasmatic projection of the militant subject, this is not a theoretical dispute, but the confrontation between that projection and the real that escapes it.

The remain(s) of time, or that time that is not without being nothing, point to a "time," or ~~time~~, that is no longer the time of metaphysics, but as such is only "time" if we understand this word catachrestically, as the only word that we have available even though it is not up to the task, for this "time" is a formless time, the absence of time as a formalized structure of any sort, a time that lies beyond the columns (for instance the two columns of *Glas*). This is an uncertain time. And yet there is the need for infrapolitical deconstruction to make it appear, not as an aesthetic program, but as a confrontation with the formlessness of history. "Forces resistant to the *Aufhebung*, to the process of truth, to speculative negativity, must be made to appear," while at the same time maintaining that "these forces of resistance do not constitute in their turn relievable or relieving negativities. In sum, a remain(s) that may not be without being nothingness: a remains that may (not) be" (*Glas* 43).

Only then will the question of nihilism become something other than the accusation of disbelief, in order to open itself up to the gathering of thought in the nothingness that nihilism is: only then will nihilism become thinkable as something other than a nostalgic desire for values, for, the void is not a site from which a sequence departs, after which there is loyalty to the consequences that displace it. The void is not a structural constant that needs to be supplemented with the vocabulary of contingency or fidelity. It is what makes of politics that field from which only structured and formed absolute *phantasies* can be expected, such as the absolute knowledge of what the presence of the present is, from which the certitude of what is to be done would be deduced. What this says is something that we all

know intimately: there is always the need for further change; and to say this does not make choosing between evil and a lesser evil anything other than a forced choice for evil. The accusation of nihilism, which comes down as a sledgehammer or serves as a putative crowbar for liberation from a phantasized worldwide domination of post-metaphysical thought, is also a strange condemnation of the formless nothingness from which history is made. Conservative thought is the thought that seeks to restrain this dark matter, history itself, ~~being~~, by believing that its own praxis is immune from the ineluctable effects of degradation, and this by the sheer force of a willed forgetting.

It is important to keep in mind what the point of reference is here. For Bosteels, following Badiou, not to will the forgetting of the forgetting is to keep to a perverse radicalism that cancels the possibility that an "unprecedented regime of consequences can be initiated in the here and now by a rare temporal act of subjectivation" (*Badiou and Politics*, 172). According to this orientation, in the "denegation of all present temporality," the obscure subjective figure becomes "fundamentally a figure of death" (172). The question is immediately asked by Bosteels, should we not consider the acknowledgement of the death drive, the void, difference, the Real at the heart of social antagonism, the impossibility of all present temporality except as citations of a "here and now"—should not all of this be considered a mystical intuition that immediately renders impossible "the consequent belaboring of a new and unheard-of truth" (172)? But if you opt for the forgetting of the forgetting, that is, if you opt for the rejection of what has already been acknowledged, you have to accept what this implies within the history of thought that is at the heart of these daunting and complicated questions: that this is not truly an option except as the unwitting choice for the tomb where everything that yet comes under Absolute Knowledge falls. Beyond what can be decided by the subject of truth, it is his or her phantasm that is consequently belabored when here and now are taken to be something other than citations. What lies beyond that phantasy is not the tragic sublime of the political, and much less the philosophical idea of time or times, but the simple datum that the "~~time~~" that lies beyond the columns, beyond the philosophical projection of its form, whether it is declined politically or otherwise, is not the figurative imposition of anyone's "here" and "now." The rest of time: an unwieldy time that cannot be managed or imposed on anyone.

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Notes

[1] Among others, Bosteels is a representative of this charge (*Actuality*... 280; *Marx and Freud* 159-193). Rebeca Comay, writing also of the terror of the *tabula rasa*, sums it up by asserting that for a certain species of speculative leftist *belle âme* "misery provides its own pacifications" (Comay 150).

[2] Bosteels: "In fact, when it does not opt for the traditional format of philosophy, one of the only ways in which the defeatist stance of postmetaphysical thought can still garner for itself the appeal of radicalism is via some convoluted argument or other about the resistance to theory. The proof, then, is not in the pudding so much as in the fact that so many people refuse to eat it" ("The Efficacy…" 663).

[3] Though here I cannot engage in a dialogue with recent work that has been appearing in relation to the important notion of horizon, I would like to at least mark the that this dialogue is and should be taking place elsewhere (see Steinberg and Draper).

[4] Only when this is taken into account does it become possible to understand the proper place of Derrida's *différance*. The point is important enough to require the clarification of a possible misunderstanding, which lies at the heart of David C. Wood's otherwise illuminating *The Deconstruction of Time*. Wood attempts to expose a fault in Derrida's thinking on time. On the one hand, Wood argues, Derrida is known for his claim that an other concept of time cannot be opposed or offered as a "good" alternative to the "bad" time of the metaphysics of presence: "time in general belongs to metaphysical conceptuality" (269, Wood is citing from "Ousia and Gramme"). Time is always a fundamental concept when it is a question of metaphysics, which is to say that time is a fundamental concept whenever *différance* is denied. For *différance*, as Derrida writes, "is the constitution of the present, as an 'originary' and irreducibly non-simple (and therefore *strictu sensu* nonoriginary) synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions, and protentions [terms only used provisionally] … which (is) (simultaneously) spacing (and) temporization" (273; Wood is citing from "Différance" [Derrida *Margins of Philosophy* 13]). The implication is that for Derrida there cannot be a two-tier temporality: "*Différance* cannot be used as a corrective" (273). For Wood this implies that *différance* is used in a quasi-transcendental manner that is illegitimate. On the other hand, it is possible to find places in which Derrida surprises the reader by referring to a delinearized temporality which appears when what is strategically at issue is, for example, showing the nonlinearity of signification that linguistics or structuralism denies. More recently, it is possible to find Derrida alluding to an alternative to the transcendental phenomenology of time while speaking of a welcoming to the temporality of the other: "the present or proper time of the other, which I must no doubt forego, giving up radically, but whose very possibility … is also at the same time the chance of the encounter … of the event …" (*Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan* 133). Wood's point is that by denying the quasi-transcendental status of *différance* as the constitution of the present the possibility of "an alternative nonmetaphysical temporality" would then open up, eliminating the apparent contradiction at the heart of the very concept of multiple or alternate temporalities (Wood 277). However, this proposal would amount to annulling the whole of Derrida's contribution to the deconstruction of western metaphysics.