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### Beyond the State, beyond the Desert

#### In the Shadow of 1968

“Nothing seems more dangerous to me,” Michel Foucault laments in his lecture at the Collège de France on February 2, 1983, “than that much vaunted shift from politics [*la politique*] to the political [*le politique*], which in many contemporary analyses seems to me to have the effect of masking the specific problem and set of problems of politics.”<sup>1</sup> Why such a polemical reference to “contemporary analyses” in the middle of a discussion of the complex relationship between *dynasteia* (“the exercise of power”) and *politeia* (“problems of constitution”) with regard to an interpretation of *parrhesia* (“truth telling”) in Euripides’s *Ion*? Why this outright dismissal of the shift to *the political*, which is in French a gender shift from the feminine to the masculine noun? And whom was Foucault thinking of in this passage of his lecture, which is so emphatic but at the same time rather enigmatic?

Frédéric Gros, the editor of Foucault’s 1982–1983 lectures, infers that Foucault is referring to Claude Lefort, and I think he is probably right. Since the early 1970s Lefort had been engaged, particularly with Marcel Gauchet, in a critical rereading of the concept of democracy against the background of totalitarianism. In a series of influential essays collected in 1986 Lefort aimed at a “restoration of political philosophy” precisely centered on the distinction between politics and the political, which he basically carved out of thought-provoking interpretations of Alexis de Tocqueville and Hannah Arendt.<sup>2</sup> The discussion on the political had been an important chapter of French intellectual history since the late 1960s, and it can be considered one of the most important ways in which political philosophy and culture

attempted to come to terms with the great challenge of *mai '68*—by neutralizing it. The politicization that emerged from the barricades of Paris's *Quartier latin* was definitely acknowledged by Lefort, but it was also located in a fundamental continuity with the logics of totalitarianism. Disentangling the political from the social and affirming the autonomy of the political was for him the only way to “rescue” *mai '68* from the ghosts of “revolutionarism” and to restore it within the language of democracy and human rights.

Formerly Marxist French intellectuals such as Lefort, who had been a member of the revolutionary group *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, discussed the *retour du politique* with liberal as well as conservative thinkers. Although the great shadow of Raymond Aron had hung over the debate since its inception, it is worth remembering also the contribution of Julien Freund, who introduced the works of Max Weber and Carl Schmitt to the French scholarly debate. It is therefore highly plausible (and at the same time a good example of the contemporary concerns behind his work on the Greeks in the early 1980s) that Foucault was referring to Lefort on February 2, 1983.

I would nevertheless like to point to another possible polemical target of Foucault's. The political and theoretical discussions within Italian workerism in the 1970s were dominated by the clash between a theory of workers' autonomy and a theory of the autonomy of the political. Whereas the name of Antonio Negri is the best-known representative of the former, Mario Tronti (who in the early 1960s helped found the workerist theoretical tradition) played a crucial role in the development of the theory of the autonomy of the political. Tronti's *Sull'autonomia del politico* (*On the Autonomy of the Political*) is a dense and influential pamphlet that was published at the beginning of 1977, the year when the conflict between radical movements and the institutional Left, including and primarily the Communist Party of which Tronti was a member, reached its apex in Italy, culminating in violent clashes during demonstrations and in factories, universities, and schools. Tronti's sophisticated theoretical project nurtured a series of historical and theoretical investigations on the political that had been undertaken by him and his research group—ranging from reconstructions of the concept and history of bourgeois revolution in England and in France to new readings of Thomas Hobbes and G. W. F. Hegel. Nevertheless, the very label “autonomy of the political” was widely read in Italy as an endorsement of the strategy of “historical compromise” devised by the secretary of the Italian Communist Party, Enrico Berlinguer. At the time, the Communist Party aimed at an agreement (a “historical compromise”)

with the Christian Democracy as a means to consolidate “democracy” and to confront the radicalization of social struggles and movements in Italy. This was the basis for the Communist Party’s key role in the repression of the movement of 1977 in Bologna (a symbolic city for the institutional Left) and more generally of autonomist movements in the late 1970s.

We know that Foucault was following with great interest the developments of the Italian political situation in those years. In July 1977, along with Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Jean-Paul Sartre, he signed a petition against the repression of the autonomist movement in Italy. Less well known is the fact that in the fall of the same year one of the most authoritative proponents of the autonomy of the political, Massimo Cacciari, published a violent essay against Foucault and Deleuze.<sup>3</sup> In the essay, Cacciari denounces Foucault and Deleuze as inspiring autonomist movements in Italy (which was indeed increasingly the case) without being able to understand the firm laws of organizations and political parties and the techniques and rules that make up the political. Written with a capital *P*, the Political of the Italian discussion may well have left some traces in Foucault’s mind.

### A Schmittian Renaissance

Also, the political simply sounds good. It conveys the idea that there is something transcendent in politics (allow me to play this theological trick, considering the closely intertwined discussions of the political and political theology). And this “something” seems more intriguing than what is usually identified with politics. This may well be one of the reasons why the label is so widespread in theoretical debates today and often without any attempt to explain where the distinction between the political and politics lies. When that attempt is made, the two main sources of the distinction since the 1970s are Schmitt and Arendt. In the French context, Arendt is the main theoretical referent (with the notable exception of Freund). The Italian theory of the autonomy of the political was developed by taking Schmitt as the fundamental point of departure. Tronti himself was one of the protagonists of what Ilse Staff called the Italian “Schmitt renaissance” that started in Italy in the 1970s and was characterized by the intellectual Left’s fascination with the thought of the German jurist.<sup>4</sup> One could even say that the work of Giorgio Agamben since *Homo Sacer* is a late outcome of the Schmitt renaissance.

The Schmittian concept of the political, originally proposed in a 1927 essay, is well known in its general outline—from the emphasis on

the friend/enemy distinction to the critique of legal and political pluralism, one of its main polemical targets. In Schmitt's opening sentence, "The concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political," we can find the key to the full understanding of the essay.<sup>5</sup> In order to grasp the radical novelty of the Schmittian problematic, one has to recall only that in one of the most influential works of German (and indeed European) legal theory of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the *Allgemeine Staatslehre* (*General Theory of the State*), Georg Jellinek states quite the opposite: "In the concept of the political [*im Begriff des Politischen*], the concept of state is already implied."<sup>6</sup> The famous lecture delivered by Max Weber in late 1918, *Politics as a Vocation*, is entirely inscribed within this theoretical framework, which constructed the state as the insurmountable horizon of political modernity.<sup>7</sup> Less than a decade later, against the background of the great legal and political discussions on the Weimar democratic constitution (and of the consolidation of the Russian Revolution), Schmitt had started to explore a new landscape, one beyond the state: "The European portion of humanity has lived, until recently, in an era in which juridical concepts were totally oriented toward and shaped by the state and presupposed the state as the model of political unity. The era of the state is now coming to an end, and it is no longer worth wasting words about that."<sup>8</sup>

Carlo Galli argues that while Schmitt's thought can be read productively as a genealogical deconstruction of the conceptual history and logics of the modern state, Schmitt himself was so internal to this history and to these logics that his attempts to transcend them were doomed to fail.<sup>9</sup> These theoretical circumstances (even more than his infamous political positions) make Schmitt's work inappropriate for a critical analysis of the political and legal logics emerging in the current global transition. Nevertheless, one should take into account that Schmitt forged the concept of the political out of an acute awareness of the sunset of the age of statehood: for Schmitt, unlike many contemporary Schmittian theorists, no words needed to be wasted on the fact of the "dethroning" of the state fifty years ago.

From this angle, the 1970s Italian discussion on the autonomy of the political takes on quite paradoxical features. Tronti developed his theory within the framework of an interpretation of the "delay" of Karl Marx's reflection on politics with regard to his reflection on political economy. According to Tronti, this delay did not allow Marx to focus on the "specificity of the political cycle with regard to the economic cycle." Tronti adds, "We are confronted with capital and its state, almost like two parallel histories, which do not always coincide and sometimes contradict each other."<sup>10</sup>

The theoretical project was quite ambitious but, one could ironically say, a repetition of Marx's "delay." Although the very form of the state was undergoing deep transformations and its crisis had political as well as theoretical implications, Tronti's proposal was to direct collective efforts toward the "discovery of the *laws of movement of modern state*, in the same way in which Marx discovered the laws of movement of capital."<sup>11</sup> The autonomy of the political was therefore bound to become the autonomy of the state, and Tronti posited the working class (against the economic and even more political "irrationality of capital") as "the only possible rationality of the modern state."<sup>12</sup> The conclusion is quite embarrassing for anybody who—like myself—has learned so much from Tronti (even from his writings on the autonomy of the political, where he proposed a challenging reading of Schmitt and Marx against the background of the problematic of "primitive accumulation").<sup>13</sup> Tronti argues: "*The modern state turns out to be, at this moment, nothing less than the modern form of autonomous organization of the working class.*"<sup>14</sup> Needless to say, the party was the necessary means of this "becoming state" of the working class.

It is easy to understand why proponents of the autonomy of the political were not particularly fond of Foucault's theoretical and political project. Independent of the political stakes (and catastrophes) of the Italian discussion (and political history) of the 1970s, it is also easy to understand why such a powerful and fascinating thinker as Tronti was caught in the following decades in a continuous elaboration of mourning for the labor movement, the state—and *politics*. (In fact, Tronti titled his 1998 book *La politica al tramonto*, or *Politics at Sunset*.<sup>15</sup>) Starting from the autonomy of the political, he had come to identify politics and the state form. On the contrary and independent of the many shortcomings and tragic mistakes of that tumultuous age, the political practices, social struggles, and movements within which the interest for Foucault was growing in the 1970s in Italy were really exploring and materially building a political landscape beyond the state. And it is not by accident that intellectuals working from within those practices and struggles were more able, a couple of decades later, to grasp the novelty of "globalization."

### **An Ontology of the Present**

The double genealogy of the debate on the political that I have schematically traced, epitomized by Arendt and Schmitt, Lefort and Tronti, casts an interesting light on the critique of "the shift from politics to the political"

made by Foucault in his 1983 lecture course. That critique, despite or precisely because of its trenchant nature, makes visible the materiality of contemporary politics underlying Foucault's late courses. A strange but strong fidelity to the rupture produced in the very ontological fabric of modern politics by the movements and struggles around *mai '68* looms behind his engagement in the genealogical reconstruction of ancient Greek *parrhesia*. It is quite striking to read in this light a short reply to "some critics" that Foucault wrote in 1978. Against the background of a fierce defense of the "physical" and "existential" nature of the "radicality" of his theory of power, Foucault attacks here the intellectuals of the Italian and French Communist Parties, whose missions were to repress precisely that kind of radicality, to "calm the reality." And since the intellectuals could not admit such a mission, they *were compelled to lie*.<sup>16</sup> Nothing could be more remote from the politics of *truth* that Foucault would investigate a couple of years later through his work on *parrhesia*.

Foucault described his philosophical project in the first lecture of *The Government of the Self and Others* as "an ontology of the present, of present reality, an ontology of modernity, an ontology of ourselves."<sup>17</sup> I would contend that *mai '68* was for Foucault a distinctive feature of that "present"—a turning point defining the very conditions of thinking and nothing more, but also nothing less. From this point of view he considered the "shift from politics to the political" as a kind of reactive gesture—one "reacting" to the challenge of *mai '68* but at the same time *neutralizing* it.

I do not want to claim that *any* use of the political in contemporary debates, in *our* present, bears the traces of such a reactive gesture. But I do think that Foucault's critique may still be used as a kind of methodological warning regarding such a widespread use. The example of Chantal Mouffe, one of the most authoritative theorists of "radical democracy," will suffice here. The importance of Schmitt for the development of her (as well as Ernesto Laclau's) theoretical and political project is well known. This importance is linked directly to her belief that the thought of Schmitt provides us with essential conceptual tools "for grasping the situation in which we find ourselves today after the end of the bipolar world order."<sup>18</sup> As far as the distinction between the political and politics is concerned, Mouffe must be credited with giving a clear-cut definition: "by 'the political,' I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by 'politics' I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political."<sup>19</sup> For Mouffe (radi-

cal) democracy is the political form that acknowledges the “ineradicability” of antagonism but at the same time is able to “tame” it, to transform it productively into agonism and to mutate enemies into adversaries.

Several critical points can be made regarding this theory of the political as the basis of a radical democratic politics. First, one could easily note that while Mouffe presents it as a radical critique of liberalism, some of the most important liberal theorists of the twentieth century stressed the productive character of conflict as a distinctive feature of liberalism. Aron’s lectures on the industrial society and Sir Ralf Dahrendorf’s analysis of the institutionalization of industrial conflict come to mind.<sup>20</sup> More important, the “anthropological” reading of antagonism provided by Mouffe, who locates it at the level of *identity*, risks to reduce antagonism itself to a constant of human nature, neutralizing (once again this peculiarly Schmittian word) the possibility of discriminating its material determinations. If human nature bears the signs of antagonism, which means of a division, of the “two,” it is easy to see that politics cannot but be obsessed by the logic of *unity*: of the production of that unity that Laclau, starting from the same theoretical presuppositions, identifies with the production of the *people*, “the political act par excellence.”<sup>21</sup> It should not be difficult to see that such theories of radical democracy land not far from Leviathan.

Mouffe writes, “There is no consensus without exclusion, no ‘we’ without a ‘they,’ and no politics is possible without the drawing of a frontier.”<sup>22</sup> This drawing of boundary lines, as well as the resulting dialectics of inclusion and exclusion, are thus projected and congealed as anthropological preconditions of politics, and the very form of the modern state is once again established as the insurmountable horizon of political thinking, action, and experience. Mouffe’s defense of the “old rights of sovereignty” from any “cosmopolitan” criticism and her identification of sovereignty as the only possible basis of democracy can be read as particularly significant. But the point is more general, and it interpellates the whole theoretical project developed by Mouffe and Laclau since *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*: the emphasis on the “partial character” of all social struggles and the reformulation of Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony as a theory of articulation have reinscribed in a very sophisticated theoretical framework the *transcendence* of the political moment that makes up the logics and history of the modern state-form. The political is the (not so) empty and (not so) fluctuating signifier of this reinscription.

Laclau and Mouffe write: “All struggles, whether those of workers or other political subjects, left to themselves, have a partial character, and can

be articulated to very different discourses. It is this articulation which gives them their character, not the place from which they came.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, the critique of traditional Marxism, the refusal of the idea of the existence of a “unique privileged position” for thinking and practicing the transformation of society (meaning the position of the working class and the contradiction between capital and labor), leads to a depoliticization of social struggles and a reinstatement of the “privileged position” that has been traditionally occupied by the state (and by the party). Welcome to the desert of the real, we could say, adapting to our argument the title of a book by Slavoj Žižek.<sup>24</sup> But maybe the real looks like a desert because of theoretical lenses we employ to look at it. Independent of what one thinks of Foucault’s project in his late years, he was at least looking for new conceptual lenses in order to map a new political landscape—beyond the state, beyond the desert.

#### Notes

- 1 Michel Foucault, *The Government of the Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 159.
- 2 Claude Lefort, *Essais sur le politique: XIX–XV siècles* (Paris: Seuil, 1986). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.
- 3 Massimo Cacciari, “‘Razionalità’ e ‘irrazionalità’ nella critica del Politico in Deleuze e Foucault” (“Rationality and Irrationality in Deleuze’s and Foucault’s Critique of the Political”) in *Aut Aut*, no. 161 (1977): 119–33.
- 4 Ilse Staff, *Staatsdenken im Italien des 20. Jahrhunderts: Ein Beitrag zur Carl Schmitt-Rezeption (Political Thinking in Italy in the 20th Century: A Contribution on the Reception of Carl Schmitt)* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1991).
- 5 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, ed. and trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 19.
- 6 Georg Jellinek, *Allgemeine Staatslehre (General Theory of the State)*, 3rd ed. (1900; Berlin: Springer, 1922), 180.
- 7 Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004).
- 8 Carl Schmitt, preface to *Der Begriff des Politischen (The Concept of the Political)* (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1979), 10; translation by author.
- 9 Carlo Galli, *Lo sguardo di Giano. Saggi su Carl Schmitt (Janus’s Gaze: Essays on Carl Schmitt)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008). An English translation is forthcoming from Duke University Press.
- 10 Mario Tronti, *Sull’autonomia del politico (On the Autonomy of the Political)* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1977), 16.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 13 See, for instance, Mario Tronti, “Marx e Schmitt: un problema storico-teorico” (“Marx



- and Schmitt: A Historical-Theoretical Problem”), in *La politica oltre lo Stato: Carl Schmitt*, ed. Giuseppe Duso (Venice: Arsenale Cooperativa Editrice, 1981), 25–40.
- 14 Tronti, *Autonomia del politico*, 20.
- 15 Mario Tronti, *La politica al tramonto (Politics at Sunset)* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998).
- 16 Michel Foucault, “Precisazioni sul potere: Risposta ad alcuni critici” (“Clarifications on Power: A Reply to Some Critics”), *Aut Aut*, no. 167–68 (1978): 3–11. In the same issue of *Aut Aut* Antonio Negri published his first essay dedicated to a discussion of Foucault’s work: Negri, “Sul metodo della critica della politica” (“On the Method of the Critique of Politics”), *Aut Aut*, no. 167–68 (1978): 197–212. It is worth reading the recent reconstruction of the encounter with Foucault provided by Negri, “Quand et comment j’ai lu Foucault” (“When and How I Read Foucault”), in *Cahier Foucault* (Paris: L’Herne, 2011), 199–206.
- 17 Foucault, *Government of the Self*, 21.
- 18 Chantal Mouffe, “Schmitt’s Vision of a Multipolar Order,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 104.2 (2005): 245–51.
- 19 Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 9.
- 20 Raymond Aron, *18 Lectures on Industrial Society*, trans. M. K. Bottomore (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967); and Ralf Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959). One could say of Mouffe what Leo Strauss said in 1932 of Schmitt’s inability of really breaking out of the “systematic” horizon of liberalism: his affirmation of the political was for Strauss just a paradoxical “liberalism with the opposite polarity.” See Strauss, “Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*,” in Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 97–122.
- 21 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 154.
- 22 Mouffe, *On the Political*, 73.
- 23 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2001), 169.
- 24 Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002).