



The Anarchy of Beginnings:

Notes on the Rhythmicity of Revolt

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1. The unthought

Can we think something like a “revolt”? Has revolt been thought? Under what conditions might thought be able, eventually, to grasp what we call a revolt? And then what could a revolt be? It is by no means obvious that it is possible to think revolt, particularly from within the academic discipline that we know as “philosophy”. To think revolt entails nothing less than an irruption of thought. When the streets are filled with crowds and the grammar of power begins to be called into question, we witness a storm of thinking, a dance of bodies that become other modes of inhabiting the city: thinking revolt means that thought itself happens as a revolt.

However, it must be noted that modern philosophy, even in its most radically democratic categories, appears overwhelmed by the fervor of revolt. For a philosophy that has tethered itself to the notion of the ‘subject’ and thereby imprisoned itself within the problematic of ‘sovereignty’, a constituent process can only be conceived from within the duality of reform and revolution. This duality, which is politico-theological in nature, points us in the direction of the constitution of a state form. Although its two sides imply a similar temporal structure (both point to a linearity of the future), they differ in their process and acceleration. Modern philosophy—and especially its philosophies of history—has conceived of reform and revolution as means by which constituent power can bring about transformation, the latter being understood exclusively in terms of the seizure of state power.

This problem became symptomatic in many of the reflections that came out of the experience of the Arab Spring. Iranian political scientist Asef Bayat offers an pointed example, when he argues that the movement was “revolutionary” in terms of its “movement”, since its squares afforded the experience of a *communitas*, but “reformist” at the level of its “demands” (because, unlike the revolutionary processes of the 1960s that sought to transform capitalism, the latter aimed merely to claim human and social rights). Bayat radicalizes this position by asking: how to characterize the Arab Spring?

How then, Bayat asks, do we characterize the Arab Spring? Was it reformist or revolutionary? Taking over a term used by Timothy Garton-Ash to describe the Sandinista Revolution, he proceeds to argue that the Arab Spring articulated a middle ground that he terms “refolution”.¹ However, what Bayat’s hybrid concept fails to problematize is the maintenance of the classical philosophical and theological-political horizon that gathers all such processes within the duality of reform-revolution.

In the same vein, Alain Badiou characterized the Arab Spring as a “historical revolt”. According to Badiou, a “historical revolt” has a “pre-political” character, transcending national borders and bringing together multitudes of young students and workers. But despite the acuity of his remarks, Badiou nonetheless insists on the pre-political dimension of the uprising, on the understanding that politics proper comes of necessity only with revolution. Like Bayat, Badiou continues to think within the modern framework of reform-revolution, subordinating the “historical revolt” of the Arab Spring to a later revolution in which politics could truly come into being.

In spite of their differences, both authors are beholden to a common grammar that leaves the singular interruption of revolt unthought. Perhaps what is in question is a masculine philosophical register that struggles to think beyond monumentality and the state form: a philosophy of power, if you will, that remains attached to

the metaphysics of “the subject” and “its work”. But the decisive element cannot be grasped by the categories of revolution and reform; what must be thought is “revolt” as a *minor becoming* that exceeds the classical modern dualism to which the metaphysics of the subject and work aspires.

2. What is a revolt?

At the edges of modern metaphysics, revolt erupts. The Italian Egyptologist Furio Jesi once stressed that, in contrast to revolution, revolt is defined by “the suspension of historical time”.² At issue is not a process that points to some half-assured future, either through procedures defined by stages (reformism) or by a radical event that establishes a new order of things (revolution), but a *minor becoming* that, by “suspending historical time” in the fleeting “now”, causes past and present to intersect epiphanically. Following Jesi, the revolt plants itself, henceforth, in an *other scene* with respect to the metaphysics of the work, since it assaults the constituted order by undoing it, rendering it radically inoperative.

In one of his most recent books, Giorgio Agamben underlined a decisive concept that allows us to think through the singularity of the work Jesi handed down to us, namely, that of *destituent power*.³ The term designates a type of political act of an affirmative nature in which a new use of bodies takes place. As we know, for Agamben the concept of “use” displaces that of “action”: far from articulating a politics grounded in its “works”, the notion of “use” restores to politics its dimension of inoperativity.

Revolt—a category that Agamben does not problematize, but which we can thematize along lines he has indicated—has a destituent dimension insofar as it suspends historical time, allowing bodies to acquire a new use and a different rhythm. In the Chilean October, this mutation took on a name: *evade*. A name that profaned the

legal and economic discourse so typical of the forms of impunity with which oligarchy carries itself, designating a new use of bodies, rhythms of another form of life.

To “evade” became a synonym for destitution, a politics of revocation that suspends historical time in a “now” full of possibilities. Unlike the intelligentsia who cleave to the principle of “order”, and who see in revolt nothing but a nihilistic process of destruction, we must instead learn to distinguish between the destructive characteristic of the avant-gardes and the destitution whose *ethos* derives from a common potentiality subtracted from any vanguard or leadership that, under the genealogical figure of the pastorate, whose claim to lead the masses to redemption.

When we say that revolt assumes a destituent character, we mean that its wager no longer lies in the fulfillment of determinate end (the establishment of a new regime), but in its capacity to delegitimize a determinate regime while itself *inhabiting a space of pure means*. Through the revolt, the emperor appears fully naked and, as Pasolini once said, power displays its thoroughly “anarchist” structure.

For this reason, revolt is not *tragic*, but *comic*: it tears off the mask not in order to reveal what lies “behind” it, but rather to exhibit the fact that *beneath the mask there is nothing and no one who can claim to know anything about us*. In the multiplicity of its dance, revolt is pure surface, without being. Nor is it a new order that would reproduce the political theology that props up the state and capital, but an irrigation of new rhythms or uses in rebellious bodies. It can even camp out in those spaces captured by power, producing unprecedented movements and diverse strategic possibilities. Its comedy consists in mocking the constituted regime of power in place, just as the latter—by virtue of its theological-political structure—will always reproach revolt for being a meaningless or nihilistic conceit.

In order to not exhaust itself in the frenzy of events, revolts

must take care to emphasize and deepen the practice of what Furio Jesi termed “demythologization”, an ongoing critical labor upon the signs of power that seeks to avoid replicating them and thus reproducing the oppressor’s own logic among the oppressed. De-mythologizing refers to a critical work that rhythms the surface of the bodies in alternate modes, substantially disrupting the order of things.

Henri Meschonnic’s distinction between critique and polemic is instructive here: whereas critique would be aligned with the very context of the revolt, polemic cries out loud but transforms nothing, for it remains in service to the very power that consumes it as spectacle. In our time, critique and polemic mix and become confused to such an extent that the latter appears to devour the former. But there is only criticism and, consequently, “demythologization” when we destitute the “false myths” of the prevailing grammar, when we interrupt its historical continuum in the epiphanic irruption of the multitude.

Revolt—which serves here as another name for the event—is a critical labor, in which a tumultuous popular energy erupts as a form of thought. This is why revolt does not need some “philosophy” to direct it and lead it pastorally to its destiny, since it is the moment in which a people truly thinks, exercising the critique that had previously been absent.

3. Rhythmic markers

No sooner did the Arab Spring gave way to counter-revolution at the hands of Islamist movements, Western powers and Arab oligarchies, than we heard a chorus of experts pronounce its judgment that revolt is useless, that after its fervent moment everything seems to remain the same. In fact, this is only an illusion: when revolt crashes through, it strips the edifice of power of its fanciful garb, exposing its constitutive violence. Is revolt useful? A foolish question. Revolts

do not “serve” anyone. In any case, this is true of many historical uprisings, such as the Palestinian intifada of 1987 and 2000, but also of the Spartacist rebellion. Such events are marked by an implosive logic, in which people are thrown back upon their imagination. Something has been let loose, something has been left floating, the words are running, the signs are sinister; we never see a revolt, but its effect is felt in the dislocation it installs in us.

Revolts are never composed of a single “movement”, but of several movements that converge in an untimely way in each uprising: these movements serve as *rhythmic markers* that irrigate a new temporality and facilitate transformations in the site of the crowd’s dance. Their strategic importance lies not in that cartographic planning so characteristic of power’s diagrams, but in the melodic invention of a new use of bodies.

So far, the Chilean revolt has had two key *rhythmic markers*: the rebellion of the high school students, and the feminist insurgency, both of which introduced pivots within the processual becoming, both of which have taken turns in the destituent exercise of impugning power. Between these, neighbourhood assemblies, plaza takeovers, and countless new forms of organisation have also served as supports and catalyzing energies in the course of the uprising.

What, then, does it mean to think revolt? Borrowing an analogy from psychoanalytic jargon, we might say that, traditionally, philosophy would be to the naivety and tranquillity of conscience as revolt would be to the darkness and restlessness of the unconscious. But when philosophy—or any other knowledge or other practice—comes out of itself and experiences the suspension of its own *episteme*, its own grammar, then thought returns to embrace the multitude.

What matters is not to steer or lead the process but to develop new modes that enact or express it. In this way, thought ceases to contemplate an object from a position external to it (from the dis-

tance of an ideal world), but instead becomes radically woven with the event in progress, such that rhythm and thought are two names for one and the same intensity.

As I see it, if there is one thing at issue in the events of October 18th (but which was also at issue in the Arab Spring) it is a challenge to the figure of pastoral power, that is, the matrix of power on which our Republic rests and which, in the Arab world, refers to the “hypertrophic” structure of the State, as Nazih Ayubi would say.⁵ We in Chile would perhaps have been incapable of experiencing the monstrosity of this revolt if the Church had not been challenged by the courage of those who had once been its “faithful” devotees. The Church, the theological matrix of modern state policy, finds itself destituted alongside it, as the surge of popular imagination becomes unstoppable. To think the revolt means to listen to its rhythms, not merely to assemble its meaning; to experiment with our bodies, and not simply to restore their semiotic reference. As Meschonnic would say, revolt brings with it a poetics that becomes irreducible to the theological-political liturgy of the state.

This incommensurability that rends apart rhythms and signs, bodies and law, entails that they can never become properly translatable. What is a rhythm if not the poetics of all life? But if there is no possible *translatability* between rhythm and sign, between body and representation, how can we think the constitutional question from the perspective of the revolt, the childhood of every reform and every revolution, without resigning ourselves to the terrible mark of treason? The fact that one’s imagination suddenly camps in a place that does not belong to it does not mean that it cannot have an impact therein. What has this impact been? It has *opened up* a process that is unprecedented in Chile’s recent history. It has been nothing other than the *an-archy of a beginning*, the opening of a power whose future is absolutely uncertain, and after which everything can be possible.

Our revolt has given us the strength to put an end to Pinochet's Constitution and the transitional *episteme* that resulted from it. Our strategy must be to generate the conditions for translatability (between the street and the institutions) in which what is translated are not mere *signs held apart from life, but rhythms that impregnate the totality of the constituent process*. Everything passes through the decisive concept of "translation": so long as it continues to be reduced to the formality of language, we will never be able to ensure that the rhythm of revolt finds a way to survive. It is therefore not a question of articulating an institutionality that seals itself off from rhythmic power or brings it to a close, but one which instead catalyzes it and multiplies it everywhere. Translatability, then, does not involve reconciling the irreducibility between rhythm and sign, but instead embraces this abyss, the only possibility that prevents the institutional register from closing in on itself. With all the traps involved, the upcoming referendum—which has been thrown into the background by the forces of law and order—will have to discover a means of living up to our revolt.

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