

The Reality of Destitution is the Destitution of Reality

Y A PAS DE PEUPLE Y A QUE DES CLASSES
NIK LES BOURGES

NOTES FOR A
GENEALOGY
OF DESTITUENT
POWER

Jose Rosales

THE REALITY OF DESTITUTION IS THE DESTITUTION OF REALITY: PRELIMINARY MATERIALS FOR A GENEALOGY OF DESTITUENT POWER¹

Jose Rosales

During the 1970s, in Europe, a disenchanted but not
hopeless generation came to the fore to lay claim to the
political not as an autonomous and totalitarian sphere,
but as an ethical community of singularities; history
not as linear continuity, but a history whose realization
has been deferred too long; not work as economically
finalized toward the production of commodities,
but an inoperativity deprived of end [*priva di scopi*]
and yet not unproductive.²

Communism is the real movement that
destitutes the existing state of things.³

Introduction

On the 19th and 20th of December, 2001, 1 million people took
to the streets of Buenos Aires to protest the collapse of
Argentina's economy—a collapse set to the tune of 150 billion

¹ The writing of this article would not be what it is, if it were not for the feedback of Iman Ganji, whose unrepentant commitment to revolution has been nothing short of inspiring, and Mariana Silva, whose comradely patience and critical eye taught me what it means to think with *cautious* rigor. It is for them and our comrades that we continue to struggle, think, and live.

² Giorgio Agamben, "Nota alla prima edizione," in: Paolo Virno, *Convenzione e materialismo: L'unicità senza aura*, Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2011, pp. 8–9, here p. 9. My translation.

³ Invisible Committee, *Now*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2017, p. 89.

U.S. Dollars (the amount of debt owed to the IMF). In the midst of what would prove to be the opening salvo of a decade long crisis, there appeared new forms of struggle, which subsequently gave rise to the invention of new forms of theorising and political practice. For example, while traditional models of workers organisations in the 1960s and 1970s revolved around the factory (e.g. sit-ins, work slow-downs, strikes, and so on), these nascent social movements found themselves displaced from the point of production. And, given the decades long increase in unemployment leading up to the 2001 crisis, Argentina witnessed the emergence of the *Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupandos* (Unemployed Workers Movement or MTD), for whom the *piquete* (blockade) served as the new form of struggle outside of the factory site. The *piquetes*, which first appeared in the center of the country, had as its aim the obstruction of the circulation of commodities. Thus, the blockade was the practical resolution devised by MTD to the following questions: What would it mean to strike outside of the workplace as the traditional site of struggle? Or, as one unemployed worker put it, “who is going to be in control? The people in struggle or the bastards in the government?”⁴ Devoid of any particular place to strike, MTD attacked the world of the commodity that extended beyond the factory walls.

It was in light of the emergence of these new social movements and their corresponding forms of struggle that the militant research collective, Colectivo Situaciones, developed the concept of counterpower *or* de-instituent power; a category of political theorising that has now come to be known simply as destituent power:

⁴ Argentina In Revolt—Buenos Aires & the 2001/2002 IMF Riots. Produced by mass-produced collective. April 23, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBLmOo3evfo>, (19:13) (accessed 27/1/20)

they will be in reality what they are in truth: free, equal and fraternal beings.”⁴⁷

By contrast, for those who side with the Invisible Committee (as well as Guattari and Colectivo Situaciones), destituent power is the necessary measure and organisational form that communities must take in order for the struggle against capital and its nation-states to succeed. For the Committee, *human emancipation* has never been a problem first posed at the level of Being and only subsequently to be addressed at the level of concrete material collective *praxis*. Rather, for the Committee, there has never been any ‘originary’ meaning of the being of humanity toward which struggles can orient and organise themselves. The ‘truth’ of the being of humanity has never been a mere given, or an accomplished fact; it is discovered to be subject to the perpetual becoming of what is made, re-made, and *un-made*. For it is only by taking aim at, and ultimately transforming, the very “ensemble of social relations”—which is the essence of a humanity everywhere confronted by the accumulation of capital⁴⁸—that struggles realise the necessary conditions for bringing about a *real* and *concrete* genesis of what Agamben uncovered in an idealist manner: the revolution immanent to the potency of inoperativity.

⁴⁷ Louis Althusser, “Feuerbach’s *Philosophical Manifestoes*,” in: idem, *For Marx*, London/New York: Verso 2006, pp.41–48, here p. 43.

⁴⁸ “But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of...social relations.” Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in: Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, New York: Norton 1978, pp. 143–145, p. 145.

[A]t long last we have learned that power—the state, understood as a privileged locus of change—is not the site, par excellence, of the political. As Spinoza stated long ago, such power is the place of *sadness* and of the most absolute *impotence*. Thus we turn to counterpower. For us, emancipatory thought does not look to seize the state apparatus in order to implement change; rather, it looks to flee those sites, to renounce instituting any centre or centrality.⁵

Despite the eighteen year difference that separates the present moment from that of the early days of Colectivo Situaciones, the current cycle of struggles appear to have found themselves in a similar situation.

Approximately one month into the *gilets jaunes* uprising, the French online magazine, *Lundi Matin*, published an editorial entitled, “Next Stop: Destitution,” wherein one encounters the following passage:

The question is as follows: *what does it concretely mean to destitute the system in practice?* Obviously, it cannot mean electing new representatives, since the bankruptcy of the current regime issues precisely from the bankruptcy of its representative system. To destitute the system means to take over locally, canton by canton, the material and symbolic organization of life. It is precisely the current organization of life that is today in question, that is itself the catastrophe. We

⁵ Colectivo Situaciones, “On the Researcher-Militant,” <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0406/colectivosituaciones/en> (accessed 27/1/20). Additionally, and while it remains beyond the scope of this present article, it should be noted that there is a genealogy yet to be written that traces the philosophical lineage that was brought to bear upon the Argentinian situation by the militant-research work undertaken by Colectivo Situaciones; a lineage that begins with Bataille’s letter to Kojève and his concept of ‘unemployed negativity,’ through Maurice Blanchot’s reflections on May ’68 and his notion of ‘organising the rupture,’ where rupture is tantamount to a ‘nothingness in the process of its realisation,’ and then through the work of Agamben and the Invisible Committee, respectively.

must not fear the unknown: we have never seen millions of people allow themselves to die of hunger. Just as we are perfectly capable of organizing ourselves horizontally to set up blockades, we have the capacity to organize ourselves to relaunch a more sensible organization of existence. As revolt is organized locally, so it is at the local level that our solutions will be found. The “national” level is only ever the echo that issues from local initiatives.⁶

While the number of articles and analyses regarding the *gilets jaunes* uprising increases with each of its ‘Acts,’ it is worth emphasising that destituent power, as it is proposed here, is not simply an attempt to implement in practice the concepts developed by “ultra-left” theorising done in isolation. Rather, in light of the concerns that emerged early on regarding the presence of far-right and fascist elements within various locales of this nation-wide mobilisation, destituent power is seen as the means of attempting to give determinate form to the indeterminate character of the movement as a whole. For as the Italian comrades at *Common Ware* have correctly noted:

In the streets and in the squares of France over the last few weeks it was not only this impoverished middle class in its crisis of mediation that was present, of course. From time to time, in different cities and urban conflict zones, there were various proletarian and sub-proletarian segments, stratified and held in tension by generation and race. It is precisely the recomposition between the middle class in its crisis of mediation and a proletariat deprived of a future that, as we have said for some years, constitutes the decisive political point of the movements within the crisis ...To be clear: we are not

⁶ *Lundi Matin*, “Next Stop: Destitution,” <http://ill-will-editions.tumblr.com/post/180774090884/next-stop-destitution-published-on-lundi-matin> (accessed 23/2/19). Emphasis mine.

For those who side with Agamben, destitution as the practical means for rehabilitating the originary being of humanity (inoperativity) implies a certain vision of politics that posits emancipation as a fundamentally ontological problem, before being a problem for politics. To detourn Heidegger’s well known dictum, destituent power is necessary because, says Agamben, we have forgotten the originary question of the meaning of the being of humanity. Thus, despite the best efforts of thinkers such as Bruce Braun and Stephanie Wakefield,⁴⁶ who attempt to find the resources within the work of Agamben to overcome the lingering Heideggerianism that plagues his thought as a whole, Agamben’s notion of destituent power describes the type of collective action proper to all current and coming communities of whatever-singularities who struggle against the *historical* separation of life from its form, on behalf of a form of life that can only be conceived as existing prior to the history of Western governmentality. In the end, it is due to the idealist trappings that ground the opposition of the originary inoperativity of humanity to the separation of life from its form via political sovereignty that Agamben, abstractly, “calls out to Humanity. He tears the veils from universal History, destroys myths and lies, uncovers the truth of man and restores it to him. The fullness of time has come. Humanity is pregnant with the imminent revolution which will give it possession of its own being. Let men at last become conscious of this, and

⁴⁶ “Ultimately, a politics of destitution puts us in uncertain territory where being is again a *question*. If Western philosophy has always tried to determine life/being by giving it a name, a ground, a foundation, then following Agamben and Heidegger... we might begin to acknowledge that we cannot know what it means to “be” in advance...Being is not a state or a fact but rather a *question*, whose answers are rooted in space and time. The fatal, ongoing error of Western thought has been to forget this.” For more see Bruce Braun and Stephanie Wakefield, “Destituent power and common use: reading Agamben in the Anthropocene,” in: Mat Coleman and John Agnew (eds.), *Handbook on the Geographies of Power*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing 2018, pp. 259–272, p. 271.

once a means, a regulative ideal, and, perhaps, a necessary condition for climate justice.⁴⁴

And so it appears that there remains at least one more chapter in the history of destituent power that is yet to be written; one more attempt made at testing the efficacy of the concept against the structure of capitalist reality. In any event, and given the preceding analyses, what is clear by now is that rather than a shared and working definition, the Committee and Agamben, in fact, operate under qualitatively different, if not altogether incommensurable, conceptions of the very term itself. While Agamben views destituent acts as the type of activity that all those coming communities of whatever-singularities must undertake in order to wrest back the pure potency of inoperativity from which it has been alienated from by Western political sovereignty, the Invisible Committee, following Guattari's critical appraisal of the Russian Revolution, understand destituent power as the necessary means of resolving the problems that plagued the Bolshevik government from the outset ("they are transplanting forms of human relationship[s] quite foreign to socialism...between intellectual and manual work, an alienating style of mass consumption and so on...Not only are car factories imported, then, but also social neuroses and in hyperactive form"⁴⁵). So, with respect to the current cycle of struggles and the conjuncture in which they find themselves, if communism is now said to be the real movement that *destitutes* the existing state of affairs, and if destituent power is the necessary organisational form struggles must take today given the objective material conditions of globally integrated capital, communism as the real movement of *destitution* remains a contested form of struggle.

⁴⁴ Mann and Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan*, p. 183.

⁴⁵ Guattari, *Psychoanalysis and Transversality*, p. 243f.

saying that insurgencies such as that of the *Gilets Jaunes* have in fact solved the problem of recomposition. We are simply saying that within this terrain the question has been materially and spontaneously posed.⁷

The crucial point is this: it is within the context of the dissolution and recomposition of class relations within French society that we must understand this call for 'destituting the economy;' for it is only by grasping the condition and problem that defines the *gilets jaunes* uprising as one of recomposition that destituent power can be understood as an attempt at giving determinate form to what is still an underdetermined movement. In what follows, we begin with an interrogation into our present conjuncture as one in which Marx's original formulation of communism as the real movement of abolition, and Agamben's "coming community" appeals to its destituent power, encounter one another; a moment that has perhaps been captured best by the Invisible Committee's provocative reworking of this Marxian dictum when they write, "Communism is the real movement that *destitutes* the existing state of things."⁸

However, a statement such as this necessarily raises the following question: What becomes of communism if it is said to be the real movement that "destitutes" the present state of things? Does the substitution of "destitution" for "abolition" signal a principled divergence from the vision of communism found in those pages of the *German Ideology* and as intended by Marx and Engels? Or does this destituent movement mark a progressive refinement in light of the failures of historical communism and its various workers movements? As the above epigraphs already suggest, the beginnings of an answer to such questions can be

⁷ Common Ware, "The Vests Are Yellower On The Other Side," <https://ediciones-ineditas.com/2018/12/05/the-vests-are-always-yellow-on-the-other-side-an-italian-dispatch-editorial/> (accessed 18/4/19).

⁸ Invisible Committee, *Now*, p. 89.

found in the works of Giorgio Agamben and the Invisible Committee, both of whom have perhaps gone furthest in reconceiving communism via the category of destituent power.

When one reads Agamben's more recent political writings alongside his 1993 text, "Form-of-Life," as Jason E. Smith has noted, what becomes clear is that through Agamben's reworking of the set of ideas that came out of the workerist tradition, the author is led to view capitalist society and its attendant social relations as asymmetric and antagonistic to the community that is claimed to be the content proper to forms-of-life:

The workerist and post-workerist traditions understand the concept of antagonism in terms of the dynamic of capitalist social relations. This conflictual and asymmetric relation between living and dead labour is one in which living labour is always 'primary,' ...whose resistance to that form of capture drives capitalist development itself...Agamben's rewriting of this scenario situates the antagonism less within the dynamics of capitalist production than within the relation between 'massive inscription of social knowledge in productive processes,' on the one hand, and 'intellectuality as antagonist potentiality and form-of-life,' on the other...Communism is the enemy of the social, that is, the objective or factual partitioning of society into classes...To the divisions of society Agamben opposes the multitude of community. The overcoming of capitalist society assumes the name not of socialism but of community: communism.⁹

It is for these reasons that, over a decade later, Agamben reformulated the anti-work thesis of *operaismo* and *autonomia* as follows: "If the fundamental ontological question today is not

the trappings of any liberal optimism that encourages movements to reinvest their political energy into stricter cap-and-trade deals and the passage of legally binding environmental agreements between nation-states and international governing bodies. Against these two options, Mann and Wainwright view a fusion of the vision of communism articulated in *The German Ideology*, with the Benjaminian-Agambenian appeals to destituent power as the revolutionary way forward in light of an ever-warming planet:

The first opening might find inspiration in the categorical refusal that underwrites Marx's critique of sovereignty and of communism...His clearest statement on the matter is a refusal of the possibility that revolutionary thought can "know" in a definitive manner where revolutionary activity is going. Communism, he wrote, is "not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things, the conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence." The second opening might be grounded in Benjamin's call for politically resolute witness to crisis, a stance that finds affirmation in Agamben's appeal to a "coming community" and "destituent" power. We wager we need to say yes and yes, affirming both positions at once. In this view, Climate X is at

⁹ Jason E. Smith, "Form-of-Life and Antagonism: On Homo Sacer and Operaismo," in: Daniel McLoughlin (ed.), *Agamben and Radical Politics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2016, pp. 189–206, here p. 203.

management of all industries, premature liquidation of astronomic amounts of capital sunk in fossil infrastructure, centralized decisions on who can consume what goods in what amounts, punishment of transgressors threatening the annual emissions targets (cf. Delina and Diesendorf 2013). They can only be feasible under an exceptional regime dealing with an unheard of emergency—or, to quote *Terrorism and Communism*, surely Trotsky's least palatable book: 'Comrades, we stand face to face with a very difficult period, perhaps the most difficult period of all. To difficult periods in the life of peoples and classes there correspond harsh measures.'" Andreas Malm, "Tahrir Submerged? Five Theses on Revolution in the Era of Climate Change," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 25:3 (2014), pp. 28–44, here p. 38.

ing climate catastrophe expected to make itself fully felt in little over a decade.⁴¹

In line with *Lundi Matin*'s editorial, with which this article began, Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright make similar claims in their 2018 text, *Climate Leviathan*, when reflecting upon the possible paths toward an anti-authoritarian and internationalist climate justice movement capable of integrating the history and lessons of anti-capitalist struggles and the knowledges and practices of indigenous and colonised peoples into a single movement—a mode of organisation, which they tentatively nominate as 'Climate X.'⁴² For Mann and Wainwright, it is equally important for climate justice movements to avoid the seductive fantasy of a planetary communist sovereignty that would strictly regulate and police the world's energy consumption (what they dub 'Climate Mao')⁴³ as it is important to reject

⁴¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/08/global-warming-must-not-exceed-15c-warns-landmark-un-report> (accessed 27/1/20).

⁴² As Mann and Wainwright put it, "There are, we might say, two broad but distinct trajectories that might lead to Climate X. The first is a radical analysis and practice based in an open embrace of the tradition of the anticapitalist Left, spring from Marxist roots...The second trajectory gets its momentum from very different sources: the knowledge and lifeways of peoples who have long historical experience with ways of being that are not overdetermined by capital and the sovereign state. It is no accident that Indigenous and colonized peoples are at the frontlines in the struggles sowing the seeds of any realizable Climate X...The challenge that defines Climate X is bringing these two trajectories together; not to merge them, or subordinate one to the other, but to find some means by which they support each other, give each other energy and momentum. This is not impossible, although a left turn toward Leviathan or Mao will almost certainly undo the potential for synergy." Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future*, London, New York: Verso 2018, 189f.

⁴³ It is Andreas Malm who perhaps summarises Climate Mao best in his reflections on the recommendation by Kevin Anderson, deputy director of the Tyndall Centre and leading authority on emissions and mitigation scenarios, for a "planned economic recession" in order to avoid climate collapse and reduce CO₂ emissions at a rate of 10 percent per annum: "Anderson uses the term 'planned economic recession' (Anderson and Bows 2008, 3880). He does not say it loud, but 'planned economic recession' does of course objectively constitute a war against capital. More precisely, and to be perfectly honest, upward of 10 percent annual reductions in CO₂ emissions is a program for war communism. This is Trotsky vintage 1920. Needless to say, the militarisation of labor, the shooting of strikers and all the other inexcusable excesses should be avoided, but cuts of this depth would demand rationing and requisitions, warlike state

work but inoperativity...then the corresponding concept can no longer be that of 'constituent power' [*potere costituente*] but something that could be called 'destituent power' [*potenza destituente*]."¹⁰

Now, with respect to the Invisible Committee, their reconceptualisation of communism as the real movement of destituent power may appear especially deceptive to some, or lead to a fundamental misunderstanding, if such an invocation of destituent power is taken to mean a tacit affinity and endorsement of Agamben's equation of the communal content of forms-of-life with the potential realisation of communism as such. As will be seen in what follows, nothing could be further from the truth, for the Committee's usage of the concept of destituent power actually finds common ground with the very figures (*operaismo/autonomia*) from which Agamben sought to distance himself. If the Committee privileges destituent, as opposed to constituent, power, it is not due to destituent acts being the very means of arriving at the pure potentiality at the heart of forms-of-life (i.e. "intellectuality as antagonistic potentiality of forms-of-life"). Rather, theirs is a vision of communism as the real movement that destitutes the existing state of things insofar as we understand 'the destitution of the present' as meaning: (i) affirming the rupture with the current state of affairs in order to (ii) organise and render this rupture ever more real, and with the hopes of bringing this state of affairs to the point where the crises and social problems that have long persisted as the open and public secret of everyday life under capital are now directly confronted—and precisely because they can no longer be avoided. It is with respect to these two aspects of destituent power that Samuel Hayat's analysis of the *gilets jaunes* is worth recalling here:

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, "What is a destituent power (or potentiality)?" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32.1 (2014), pp. 65–74, here p. 70.

Today, far from disappearing, social antagonisms have multiplied, something which constitutes both a resource and a challenge to emancipatory politics. The old socialist solutions, centered around the question of class, already in 1848 contributed to invisibilizing the question of women and of race, even though the voices existed to put these questions front and center. A new emancipatory politics, which remains to be invented, should be based on making the ensemble of relations of domination visible, without hierarchy and by remaining open and responsive to new antagonisms which will inevitably come to light.¹¹

And so, the conclusion to be drawn from this comparative analysis is not simply that Agamben and the Invisible Committee arrive at qualitatively different understandings of the concept of destituent power; a disagreement that appears as nothing more than a difference in how each position themselves toward a shared philosophical heritage. More importantly, their respective analyses propose two distinct and competing frameworks by which we can think through the problems that determine the historical and material conditions in which communist struggle is waged today. And insofar as destituent power has appeared once again, an incommensurable difference at the level of analysis translates into a mutual antagonism at the level of practice. At the very least we can say that what is at stake, in light of ongoing social movements, is nothing short of the possibility for theoretical activity to materially effect collective practice and re-potentiate the antagonism at the heart of capitalist social life.

¹¹ Samuel Hayat, "The Gilets Jaunes and the Democratic Question," *Viewpoint Magazine*, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2019/02/13/the-gilets-jaunes-and-the-democratic-question/> (accessed 23/2/19).

If during what we call the 'de-instituent' phase, social movements attacked the neoliberal state constituting practices capable of confrontation in areas such as the control of money, or bartering; of counterviolence, as in road blocks; and of political command over diverse territories, as in assemblies; social movements, if we can still call them that, currently confront new dilemmas about whether to participate or not (and when, and how) in what could be called a 'new governmentality,' thus expressing the distinguishing features of a new phase of the state form and requiring us to problematize the concept of social movement itself.⁴⁰

What, then, are we to make of this recent and complicated history of destituent power? Is it the case that destituent power can once again be implemented given that the current cycle of struggles resemble those of Argentina in 2001 (i.e. a struggle between social movements and capitalist nation-states)? Or is it rather the case that we remain caught in the impasse Colectivo Situaciones already identified in 2014, thus making destituent power more of a problem than a resolution to the multiplication of crises of capital and the increased immiseration, which inevitably follows? With respect to the current conjuncture, it would appear that social movements have chosen to side with the former analysis; for destituent power is being hailed, once more, as the necessary organisational form that is to be assumed by present day social movements as well as the coming struggles against capital and its nation-states; and particularly with respect to the *gilets jaunes* movement in France and the impending

⁴⁰ Colectivo Situaciones, "Crisis, governmentality and new social conflict: Argentina as a laboratory," *ephemera: theory & politics in organization* 14.3 (2014), pp. 395–409, here p. 397.

pornography attests to the need for community, in the very extremeness of the latter's deprivation.³⁶

To seek out the organisational requirements for reproducing “what is lived in the fight itself;”³⁷ for reproducing “that experience of fraternity in combat, of friendship;”³⁸ for the reproduction of the fleeting experiences of a form of non-alienated living one encounters in the midst of struggle; all of these are so many iterations of the fundamental principle that what is revolutionary in moments of insurrection is the fact that individuals become accustomed to, comfortable with, and desiring of that form-of-life that no longer structures our existence according to the demands and temporality of the circuits of production and circulation. As one of the many participants in the 2013 Gezi Park protests remarked, perfectly capturing such a sentiment, “[t]he people who are coming here, for the past 18 days, are not spending money. And when they get used to not spending money, it's like a revolution within themselves.”³⁹

Eighteen Years of Giving Form To Shapeless Things: 2001–2019

Roughly thirteen years after the events that led Colectivo Situaciones to construct this notion of destitution power, they would come to identify this mode of struggle as more of a problematic impasse that needs revisiting than a simple set of prescriptions to be implemented:

³⁶ Ibid, p. 133.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 80.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 133.

³⁹ *TAKSIM COMMUNE: GEZI PARK AND THE UPRISING IN TURKEY*, direct. Marianne Maeckelbergh and Brandon Jourdan, August 5, <http://www.globaluprisings.org/taksim-commune-gezi-park-and-the-uprising-in-turkey/>, (11:18–11:32) (accessed 12/11/18).

Humanity's Innocence: From Proletarian Struggle to Prelapsarian Life

In the Summer and Fall of 2013, Giorgio Agamben delivered a series of lectures in central France and Athens, Greece, under the heading, “What is destituent power?” Now, despite the particularities to which Agamben was responding to in each lecture—the recent occupations and insurrections in Cairo, Istanbul, London, and New York; the necessity to think the end of democracy in the place of its birth—what is consistent throughout is that, for Agamben, destituent power functions as a third term that is said to overcome the static opposition between constituent and constituted power (the former being counter-hegemonic practices and the latter being acts that defend or uphold the existing institutions of the state).¹²

Perhaps more importantly, this series of lectures also marks a key development in Agamben's overall thinking since destituent power appears as the means of theorising one of the central ideas of his work as a whole—inoperativity—a concept which Agamben discovers time and again, regardless of the object of his analysis, be it theology, politics, or aesthetic and art practices. So, whether one considers his study of St. Augustine's reflections on the salvation of humanity, where human nature is conceived as “blessed inactivity, which is neither doing nor not doing;”¹³ or Walter Benjamin, who relates destituent power to Sorel's proletarian general strike in his

¹² As Agamben puts it, “if revolutions and insurrections correspond to constituent power, that is, a violence that establishes and constitutes the new law, in order to think a destituent power we have to imagine completely other strategies, whose definition is the task of the coming politics. A power that was only just overthrown by violence will rise again in another form, in the incessant, inevitable dialectic between constituent power and constituted power, violence which makes the law and violence that preserves it” (Agamben, “What is Destituent Power?” p. 70).

¹³ Giorgio Agamben, “Art, Inactivity, Politics,” in: *Fundação de Serralves Conference on Politics, Criticism of Contemporary Issues*, Serralves: Fundação de Serralves 2007, p. 131–141, here p. 138.

essay “Critique of Violence;” or regarding the relationship between poetry, communication, and language as such (“What is a poem...if not an operation taking place in language that consists in rendering inoperative, in deactivating its communicative and informative function, in order to open it to a new possible use?”¹⁴); what is always at issue is how best to conceive the reality of a form-of-life whose actions, when viewed from the vantage point of the existing order of things, cannot be understood as anything other than blessed or idle in essence, non-productive of value, and impractical for deliberation.

The salient point here is that, for Agamben, these characteristics of idleness, non-productivity, and inoperativity, are not understood to be products of history. Idleness, non-productivity, and inoperativity are *ontological* facts of human existence; so much so that Agamben will go on to claim that it is precisely these attributes, which are proper to the being of humanity, that capital appropriates and exploits:

Human life is idle and aimless, but it is precisely this lack of action and aim which makes possible the incomparable busyness of the human race. And *the machinery of government functions because it has captured within its empty heart the inactivity of the human essence. This inactivity is the political substance of the West, the glorious nourishment of all power.* This is why feasting and idleness resurface continually in the dreams and political utopias of the West...They are the enigmatic relics which the economic-theological machine abandons on the shoreline of civilization; mankind returns to them wonderingly, but always uselessly and nostalgically. Nostalgically because they seem to contain something that clings jealously to the human essence; uselessly because in reality they are nothing more than the ashes of the imma-

their poisonous merchandise?...What complicates the task for revolutionaries is that the old constituent gesture no longer works there either. With the result that the most desperate, the most determined to save it, have finally found the winning formula: in order to have done with capitalism, all we have to do is reappropriate money itself!³⁵

It is for these reasons that destituent power takes aim at capitalist social relations by giving a form and organisation to struggle that not only sustains friendship as “fraternity in combat,” but that produces the necessary conditions for what comes after the barricades and the insurrectionary fervour, which inevitably subside. To destitute the economy, then, is but the collective construction of what is necessary for the actualisation and generalisation of our non-alienated living, or what they simply call *community*:

Without at least the occasional experience of community, we die inside, we dry out, become cynical, harsh, desert-life. Life becomes that ghost city peopled by smiling mannequins, which functions. Our need for community is so pressing that after having ravaged all the existing bonds, capitalism is running on nothing but the promise of “community.” What are the social networks, the dating apps, if not that promise perpetually disappointed? What are all the modes, all the technologies of communication, all the love songs, if not a way to maintain the dream of a continuity between beings where in the end every contact melts away?...In 2015, a single website of pornographic videos called Pornhub was visited for 4,392,486,580 hours, which amounts to two and half times the hours spent on Earth by *Homo sapiens*. Even this epoch’s obsession with sexuality and its hyper-indulgence in

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 140.

³⁵ Invisible Committee, *Now*, p. 85.

they have got themselves into, with their endless Five-Year Plans of which absolutely everyone is sick to death. Not merely are they starting no institutionalizing process by importing prefabricated car factories, but by the same token *they are transplanting forms of human relationship[s] quite foreign to socialism, a hierarchization of technological functions proper to a society based on individual profits, a split between research and industry, between intellectual and manual work, an alienating style of mass consumption and so on...Not only are car factories imported, then, but also social neuroses and in hyperactive form.*³⁴

Thus, destituent power is said to be a mode of collective struggle that prioritises transforming the way in which individuals relate to the production process, such that the distinction between labour-time and leisure-time is no longer that which structures and organises everyday life. Or, as they put it:

The traditional revolutionary program involved a reclaiming of the world, an expropriation of the expropriators, a violent appropriation of that which is ours, but which we have been deprived of. But here's the problem: capital has taken hold of every detail and every dimension of existence...It has configured, equipped, and made desirable the ways of speaking, thinking, eating, working and vacationing, of obeying and rebelling, that suit its purpose. In doing so, it has reduced to very little the share of things in this world that one might want to reappropriate. Who would wish to reappropriate nuclear power plants, Amazon's warehouses, the expressways, ad agencies, high-speed trains, Dassault, La Defense business complex, auditing firms, nanotechnologies, supermarkets and

rial, glorious fuel burnt by the motor of the machine during its inexorable, relentless rotation.¹⁵

For Agamben, it is humanity's originary idleness and inoperativity that one must centre in any engagement with the questions posed by politics. In other words, it is only by attending to what is ontological regarding humanity (to that which pertains to our originary inoperativity) that we can adequately determine how best to overcome the political fact of Life separated from its form; a fact imposed on us and continuously reproduced by History.

Hence, says Agamben, the shape of the politics to come is not that of a struggle over the state or between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces. To the contrary, "the coming politics will no longer be a struggle to conquer or to control the state on the part of either new or old social subjects, but rather a struggle between the state and the nonstate (*humanity*), that is, an irresolvable disjunction between whatever singularities and the state organization."¹⁶ Given such an analysis, one is led to the logical conclusion that the politics to come will be defined, not by its struggle with and over the state, but by the struggle between "humanity" (as the nonstate) and the state, as various social forms of sovereign or governmental power, which pervert what we have always, originally, been in truth: inoperative, idle, and therefore free.

However, confronted with a conclusion as bold as this (i.e. the coming politics begins by positing an originary idleness against history as a series of state-sponsored perversions of this essence) a few questions necessarily arise: Insofar as inoperativity and destituent power is said to be the essence of the being

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 138. Emphasis mine.

¹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, "Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*," in: idem, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, University of Minnesota Press 2000, pp. 73–89, here p. 88.

³⁴ Félix Guattari, "Causality, Subjectivity and History," in: idem, *Psychoanalysis and Transversality*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2015, pp. 235–281, here 243f.

of humanity, does this not lead to an understanding of communist politics as a struggle between the ontological, on the one hand, and the historical and material, on the other? And, to what extent does the notion of destituent power refer to what are allegedly the echoes of an ontological essence from which we have become estranged under capital? In any event, the crucial point to be emphasised is that what is operative behind such strong claims regarding the substance of humanity, is an equivocation between two conceptions of time: the time of eschatology and that of history. For it is this equivocation of eschatological and historical time that grounds Agamben's understanding of inoperativity and destituent power as what is most essential to human being.

To make matters worse, one equivocation inevitably leads to another, but this time with respect to political analysis, for insofar as inoperativity/destituent power is said to be the originary substance of (human) being, the proletariat as the classical figure of revolutionary politics is now nothing but a means of returning to our once innocent, unspoiled, prelapsarian life. For Agamben, politics is the price paid by humanity's original sin of state-craft and the various, historical, forms of sovereign power that are each time realised through specific *dispositifs* of capture:

The originary place of Western politics consists of an *ex-ceptio*, an inclusive exclusion of human life in the form of bare life. Consider the peculiarities of this operation: life is not in itself political, it is what must be excluded, and, at the same time, included by way of its exclusion. Life—that is, the Impolitical (*l'Impolitico*)—must be politicized through a complex operation that has the structure of an exception. The autonomy of the political is founded, in this sense, on a divi-

modern “communism” has effectively made a tabula rasa—of everything. That's what happens to those who practice economy, even by criticizing it.³³

In other words, such appeals to humanity are possible only insofar as one assumes that the lives of individuals are adequately defined in isolation from the attributes they come to assume in the course of living; that is, insofar as one follows Agamben in confusing what is ontologically possible with what is actually an historical and material potentiality.

At stake, then, in this debate regarding destituent power is the material possibility of directly appropriating the forces and relations of capitalist production. Moreover, in contrast to Agamben's understanding of destitution in relation to law upholding (constituted power) and law establishing violence (constituent power), the Committee conceive of destituent power as being ‘against the economy’ insofar as the question isn't that of appropriating the means of production and rather poses the question of how to go about constructing the relations of social reproduction measured by something other than labor-time (or what is required for production). For the Committee, what has become evident is that given the present organisation of global society vis-a-vis capital, any politics geared toward the reappropriation of the forces of production will continue to fall short of abolishing the *relations of production* that organise and form daily life for the simple reason that,

As we know...the Russians have always imported their technology from the west; but since Khrushchev's day, they have also taken their economic models from there too [...] Obviously it will not be by importing models of desire...that the Soviet bureaucrats will escape the fundamental impasse

³³ Invisible Committee, *Now*, pp. 136f.

Here we arrive at the central difference between Agamben's and the Invisible Committee's understandings of destituent power: while Agamben consistently conceives of destituent power as the capacity for forms-of-life to redeem humanity from that which it has been ontologically estranged vis-a-vis capital, the Committee, by contrast, understands destituent power as the general phase of development of insurrection centered around anti-state, anti-bureaucratic, and communist *social relations*. Thus, it is due to this discrepancy between destitution as messianic capacity of forms-of-life and destitution as the form and organisation insurrectionary struggle takes when founded upon anti-state communist social relations, that it comes as no surprise to read the Committee issue this decidedly anti-Agambenian statement:

Only by means of this type of confusion did it become possible to imagine that a subject like "Humanity" could exist. Humanity—that is, all human beings, stripped of what weaves together their concrete situated existence, and gathered up phantasmally into one great something-or-other, nowhere to be found. By wiping out all the attachments that make up the specific texture of worlds, on the pretext of abolishing private ownership of the means of production,

Crevard—because if money and control are to infiltrate everywhere, it's necessary for money to be lacking everywhere. Henceforth, everything must be an occasion for generating a little money, a little value, for earning "a little cash" (Invisible Committee, *Now*, p. 96). The outcome of the 'Needy Opportunist' supplanting 'the Worker,' being that, today, "Capital no longer just determines the forms of cities, the content of work and leisure, the imaginary of the crowds, the language of real life and that of intimacy, the ways of being in fashion, the needs and their satisfaction, it also produces *its own people*. It engenders its own *optimizing* humanity" (Invisible Committee, *Now*, p. 100). Regardless as to whether this break from Marx and Engels is due to philosophical differences or the changes in the historical and material structure of capitalist production, it is clear that, for the Committee, any figure that identifies as the 'revolutionary subject' (whether founded upon some new and shared experience of precarious labour or otherwise) would still aim towards re-unifying the ongoing fragmentation; a gesture that necessarily leads struggles back into the dialectical dead-end of constituent/constituted power.

sion, an articulation, and an exception of life. From the outset, Western politics is biopolitical.¹⁷

That said, one may still wonder if we have been unfair with such a characterisation of Agamben, for in his 2013 lectures Agamben goes on to provide further clarification to the way in which destituent power can be said to be the shape of politics to come; a politics made possible by virtue of living in such a way

...that a form-of-life can constitute itself as the inoperativity immanent in every life. The constitution of a form-of-life coincides...completely with the destitution of the social and biological conditions into which it finds itself thrown. The form-of-life is...the revocation of all factual vocations...It is not a question of thinking a better or more authentic form of life...Inoperativity is not another work...it coincides completely and constitutively with their destitution, *with a life*. And this destitution is the coming politics.¹⁸

A passage such as this merits our interest for at least two reasons. On the one hand, destituent power is now said to be something innately bound to, yet distinct from, humanity's originary inoperativity. And while it remains the case that it is by destituent means that we are returned to our non-alienated inoperative living, Agamben qualifies this previous iteration with the inclusion of *forms-of-life* as that previously missing mediator capable of overcoming the dilemma of capital's historical separation of humanity, ontologically considered, and its alienated being, which takes the form of *bare life*. Given this formulation, destituent power must now be understood as a collective capacity accessible only through this experience of living a life inseparable

¹⁷ Agamben, "What is a destituent power (or potentiality)?" p. 65.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 74.

arable from its (communal) form: “the destitution of power and of its works is an arduous task, because it is first of all and only in a form-of-life that it can be carried out. Only a form-of-life is constitutively destituent.”¹⁹ Thus, says Agamben, it is only by means of a collectivity that it becomes possible for individuals to “return it [the human activity that is the substance of value production] to the potentiality from which it originates.”²⁰

On this account it would appear that destituent power is no longer simply the immediate recuperation of alienated (human) being and rather an always-latent possibility of non-alienated living perpetually deferred and rendered increasingly impossible. Thus, Agamben writes

Contemplation and inoperativity are...the metaphysical operators of anthropogenesis, which, freeing the living being from every biological or social destiny and from every predetermined task, renders it open for that particular absence of work that we are accustomed to calling ‘politics’ and ‘art.’ Politics and art are neither tasks nor simply ‘works’: they name...the dimension in which the linguistic and corporeal, material and immaterial, biological and social operations are made inoperative and contemplated as such.²¹

Significant in this account of destituent power is the fact that Agamben now appears capable of addressing the issue of how originary being and our future inoperativity can be said to have any relation to one another (insofar as it is the history of sovereign governmentality that has successfully functioned as that which perpetually obstructs our non-alienated living). That said, what is gained in logical consistency is simultaneously lost in terms of its concrete specificity. For while Agamben conceives

Thus, it can be said that, for the Invisible Committee, destituent acts are those which are grounded upon a rejection of developing better and more equitable strategies of economic management insofar as communism is not a “superior economic organization.” So, insofar as this notion of destituent power seeks to give form to the problems and crises capital “means to cover up” and thereby rendering them as that which can no longer be avoided or ignored within everyday life, destituent gestures necessarily involve a certain level of organisation of struggle in order to achieve the “bringing to light” of the problems and crises that affect society as a whole. What is more, it is by virtue of the Committee’s understanding of destituent power as organising struggles such that they are able to (i) resolve the problems of social reproduction through decidedly anti-capitalist (i.e. communist) measures while (ii) rendering social problems unavoidable and impossible to ignore, that we are returned to what Marx and Engels originally understood regarding that most general phase of the development of the proletariat:

In...the most general phases of the development of the proletariat, we traced the more or less veiled civil war, raging within existing society, up to the point where the war breaks out into open revolution, and where violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat.³²

³² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Communist Manifesto,” in: idem, *Marx/Engels Selected Works Vol. I*. Moscow: Progress Publishers 1969, pp. 98–137, p. 119. For the sake of clarity, it should be noted that while the Committee and Marx and Engels share in the idea that capital wages a ‘more or less thinly veiled civil war’ on social totality, the Committee break with them on the question of the proletariat as History’s revolutionary subject. Against the suggestions of the *Manifesto* and its authors, the Committee views the contemporary form of capitalist social organisation as having done away with that feature of social life (i.e. a mass and shared experience of work) required for the transformation of the objective category of workers into the subjective agent of the proletariat. For the Committee, rather than any prolongation of a shared experience of alienation definitive of the ‘mass worker,’ “[T]he majestic figure of the Worker is being succeeded by the puny figure of the Needy Opportunist [le

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 72.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 73.

²¹ Ibid, p. 74, emphasis mine.

terms “socialism” and “communism” has given rise to a more profound confusion whereby liberal economists, socialists, and Marxists have all agreed that the question with which we are confronted is nothing but “a question of management.”²⁹

To destitute or ‘abandon’ the economy not only means acknowledging the illusory gains of constituent power *in theory*; to abandon the economy implies an organisation of collective struggle founded upon the fact that “capitalism is not a mode of *management* but a mode of *production* based on specific *productive relations*, and revolution targets these relations.”³⁰ Thus, the need for an other mode of organisation and struggle than that of constituent power (a form of struggle, which poses the problem of the abolition of the present state of things as being a question of management), which begins from the recognition that

Communism is not a “superior economic organization of society” but the *destitution of the economy*. Economy rests on a pair of fictions, therefore, that of society and that of the individual. Destituting it involves *situating* this false antinomy and bringing to light that which it means to cover up.³¹

²⁹ Ibid, p. 138. Moreover, it should be noted that this is not intended as a *novel* insight on the part of the author and is rather a recapitulation of Marx and Engels’ tripartite classification of socialism: reactionary, bourgeois, and democratic. For Marx and Engels, reactionary socialists are defined by their impossible attempt at protecting feudal social relations, their attempt at establishing the rule of aristocracy sympathetic to the concerns of small producers, and their alignment with the bourgeoisie in the face of a revolutionary (communist) proletariat. By contrast, bourgeois socialists are those who “propose mere welfare measures...under the pretense of re-organizing society, [but] are in fact intended to preserve the foundations, and hence the life, of existing society,” and democratic socialists are those who advocate the same measures as communists but “not as a part of the transition to communism” as if these “will be sufficient to abolish the misery and evils of present-day society.” Friedrich Engels, “The Principles of Communism,” in: Karl Marx and idem, *Marx/Engels Selected Works Vol. I*. Moscow: Progress Publishers 1969, pp. 81–97, p. 95

³⁰ Gilles Dauvé, “Leninism and the Ultra-Left,” in: idem and François Martin, *Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement*, PM Press: Oakland, CA 2015, pp. 101–108, p. 107.

³¹ Invisible Committee, *Now*, p. 137.

of the destitution of capital as the process of transforming an overdetermined set of possible forms-of-life into an underdetermined and constrained set of possible forms, humanity cannot be said to be the sole proprietor of the potentiality (re)discovered at the end of this procedure; whether considered ontologically, or historically and materially.²² Thus we are led to wonder, is a *non-ontological* conception of destituent power possible?

Destituons le Monde:

Against the Management of Everyday Life

According to the Invisible Committee, destituent acts or gestures are realised according to the fusion of the positive-creative logic of founding the conditions for an *other* world in which many worlds fit and the negative-destructive logic of ending, once and for all, the present world fashioned in the image and likeness of capital. That is to say, destituent gestures abide by a logic where ‘the One divides into Two’ (“The destituent gesture is thus desertion and attack, creation and wrecking, and all at once, *in the same gesture*”²³); actions that are simultaneously creative and destructive. Moreover, these collective gestures belong to that class of acts, which rely upon the temporality proper to social reproduction and are actualised in times of decision, which is to say, in times of crisis. And what is ultimately realised along the way, in bringing about an end to *this*

²² Logically speaking, potentiality pure and simple is first an attribute or predicate of being in general before being a predicate of human subjectivity lest we succumb to the traps of metaphysical voluntarism that posits the being of humanity as ontologically prior to being in general. For as we have already known since Spinoza’s criticisms of the illusory approaches to theorizing forms of human living, “Most of those who have written about...men’s way of living...seem to conceive man in Nature as a dominion within a dominion.” (Spinoza, *Ethics* (Preface, BKIII), in: Edwin Curley (ed.), *A Spinoza Reader*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 85–265, p. 152, emphasis mine).

²³ Invisible Committee, *Now*, p. 88f.

world, is an altogether different solution to the two-fold problem of the *estrangement of bodies*²⁴ and *fragmentation of worlds*.²⁵

However, destituent power is said to resolve the issue of separated bodies and of the discontinuity that structures the possible worlds of every form-of-life *not* by rehabilitating some sense of ‘unity,’ conceived as the coming-into-being of a still underdetermined (though latently possible) counter-hegemonic Left. To the contrary, destituent acts resolve this crisis through the construction of a different organisation of the fragmentation already underway; a structuring process, which ensures that estranged bodies remain isolated from each other, trapped within their own solitude:

Here is the paradox, then: being constrained to unity undoes us, the lie of social life makes us psychotic, and embracing fragmentation is what allows us to regain a serene presence to the world. There is a certain mental position where this fact ceases to be perceived in a contradictory way. That is where we place ourselves.²⁶

What, then, is intended in this redefinition of “the real movement” as a process that abides by a destituent (as opposed to an abolitionist) logic? According to the terms that determine a properly destituent political logic, the virtue of any struggle against the state and capital is to be found in the potential har-

bored within each action that suggests a future that has finally done away with everything that encourages us to “hate Mondays,” when it is capital that is the cause behind the *whatever-object* of our lamentations. That is to say, the actualisation of destituent power is to give material reality to the potential of establishing the distance between movements and established institutions, in order for the former to better desert, or flee, or take flight from, everything that is involved in rendering vacuous the relation we maintain to ourselves, to those we call comrade, friend, or lover, and to the world insofar as it is made in the image and likeness of capital. As a fellow accomplice has recently pointed out with regard to the *gilet jaunes* movement in France, “[I]t is not the radicals who are making the movement, it is the movement that is radicalizing people.”²⁷

So, unlike those collectivities which tend toward “constituent” or “constituted” power and situate their strategy within the dialectical relation of recognition/negotiation with the ruling authority (i.e. organising in the hopes of realising a situation of dual power), collectivities that abide by a destituent logic adhere to, and seek to actualise, the vital need to *disengage* and distance itself from the dialectical trap of constituent-constituted power. But what would this alleged other form of unity mean, when conceived as a collective ‘abandonment’ of the economy and ‘disengagement’ from the dialectic between constituted and constituent power? At the very least, says the Committee, it would mean the reformulation of the communist question itself; for the equivocation that began with Lenin²⁸ regarding the

²⁴ “All the reasons for making a revolution are there...All the reasons are there together, but *it's not reasons that make revolution, it's bodies. And the bodies are in front of screens*” (Ibid, p. 7, emphasis mine).

²⁵ “...the world is *fragmenting*...Zone after zone, the fragmentation of the world continues, unceremoniously and without interruption...The wage-work system is breaking up into niches, exceptions, dispensatory conditions. The idea of a “precariat” conveniently hides the fact that there is simply no longer a shared experience of work, even precarious work. With the consequence that there can no longer be a shared experience of its stoppage either, and the old myth of the general strike must be put on the shelf of useless accessories” (Ibid, p. 15).

²⁶ Ibid, p. 46, emphasis mine.

²⁷ *Lundi Matin*, “Next Stop: Destitution.”

²⁸ “With the breakdown of European social democracy faced with World War One, Lenin decides to restyle the facade of the crumbling old socialism by painting the pretty word ‘communism’ on it. Rather comically, he borrows it from anarchists who have already made it their banner. This convenient confusion between socialism and communism contributed a good deal, in the last century, to making this synonymous with catastrophe, massacre, dictatorship, and genocide” (Invisible Committee, *Now*, p. 135).