

# On the Final (Im-)Possibility of Resistance, Progress and Avant-Garde

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## *(New) order*

Today, nothing seems more out-dated than the idea of progress and the concept of avant-garde. However, we want to show that probably there is a chance left for avant-garde politics under the conditions of impossibility of avant-garde. Before being able to reflect on the (im-)possibility of radical, dissident or avant-garde politics, we have to clear the field of hegemony theory along the lines of the following questions: What exactly is the function of politics and on what kind of terrain does it operate? How are political operations related to the logics of discourse and of signifying practices in general? How, in particular, does Laclau's and Mouffe's concept of radical and plural democratic politics relate to other modes of »post-structuralist« politics (Althusserian jacobinism, Lacano-Hegelian monarchism, Derridean messianism, Lyotardian pluralism, etc.)?

With *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe developed a whole new perspective on Marxisan political theory. This »post-marxist« perspective lead especially Ernesto Laclau's work into a field of considerably high abstraction, where political theory turns into a general theory of signification, which in our view is ready to be applied to other areas as well.

## *(Non) order*

If we start from the Saussurian assumption that meaning is produced in a system of differential relations, then we immediately confront the following problem: What is *beyond* this system and what is the nature of the frontiers encircling that system? If the outside of the differential system was simply another difference, then we would not be in a position to distinguish between the system and its beyond. In this case, the outside is simply part of the inside – which amounts to saying that there is no outside at all. This leads to the conclusion – given that whatever lies beyond the system cannot be part of the system – that this outside must be of a radically different nature. For only as far as the outside is a *radical* outside we can speak about an outside at all.

Now, for the sake of saving time and space I do not hesitate to set the wheels of definition going – a more elaborate summary of Laclau and Mouffe would clearly be beyond the scope of this paper.

*Politics* we call the process of »coming to terms« with the radical outside of the social. The outside of the social we can also call *the Political* with a capital P – another name for antagonisms: »antagonisms are not *internal* but *external* to society; or rather they constitute the limits of society, the latter's impossibility of constituting itself« (Laclau/Mouffe 1985, 125). Therefore by referring to antagonisms as the instance which threatens the systematicity of the social system, we should rather speak about *Antagonism* with a capital A in order to indicate the radical and non-differential character of the exterior. Because of this, Antagonism has been compared to the Lacanian Real.

Antagonism, however, is inflected into the system through politics. Hence, the work of politics is to establish discursive *antagonisms* by inflecting *Antagonism* into the social, so that the latter becomes internally criss-crossed by antagonisms and therefore never reaches final stability. Politics can do so because every system is *dislocated* in the first place. (There would be no politics in a closed stabilized system without any constitutive outside). Dislocation we call »the *disruption* of a structure by forces operating *outside* it« (Laclau 1990, 50). Although the constitutive outside of the structure/system necessarily escapes signification, it is nonetheless revealed and signified as the instance of (*non-*)order as such. In the first case we may speak about the outside as the *event* (»This 'experience' of the limit of all objectivity does have a form of discursive presence, and this is *antagonism*«. Laclau 1990, 122), in the second case it is the *empty signifier* which points at the outside from the inside. Hence, the only thing the empty signifier (the signifier without signified) signifies is the very instance of (*non-*)signification. The struggle for the temporary *incarnation* of this empty signifier of the (absent) order we name *hegemony*.

Now – somewhat speeding down – we can drive by and have a closer look at some of these concepts. Everything boils down to the process of fixation and de-fixation of meaning. It is precisely because a signifying system can never entirely stop the flux of meaning that the temporary fixation or pragmatic construction of meaning becomes possible: »if all objectivity is systematically overflowed by a constitutive outside, any form of unity, articulation and hierarchization that may exist between the various regions and levels will be the result of a contingent and pragmatic *construction*, and not an essential connection that can be recognized« (Laclau 1990, 186).

Laclau calls the outcome of the articulatory practice – the fixation of meaning – *space*, while on the other hand he sees a *temporal* phenomenon in the



dislocatory effects to which every structure is subjected to. This is because the very idea of a structure implies spatiality resp. topography (otherwise, simply spoken, the structure is not structured at all). Establishing a topography therefore implies the effort of transferring time into space (Laclau calls this the »hegemonization of time by space«), decreasing the dislocatory »destructuring« effects to a minimum and fixing the flux of meaning, essentially through *repetition* (the mythical figure of the eternal return of the same is in this sense spatial – for it describes a circle – and not temporal). The sedimented social customs and traditions are nothing else than a result of repetitive practices. (»Any repetition that is governed by a structural law of successions is space«, Laclau 1990, 41). But they have lost their contingent origin in the course of this repetition so that we now perceive them as necessary, uncontestable, eternal etc.

But as far as these sedimented layers of repetitive practices can be *reactivated*, Laclau maintains that »there is a temporalization of space or a widening of the field of the possible (...)«. We can call this the process of de-fixation of meaning. More and more elements, layers and places are going to be perceived as contingent in their relational nature. A fixed topography vanishes into a fluctuating wave. As the dislocatory effects in a structure are often experienced as a threat which simply demands their fixation and arrest, we can detect two counter-rotating movements: both fixation of meaning (hegemony) and de-fixation of sedimented meaning (reactivation<sup>1</sup>), both on the basis of the general un-fixity of meaning (dislocations).

It should have become possible now to understand the three main Laclauian categories of the social, the political, and politics. Again let us depart from a quote: »The sedimented forms of 'objectivity' make up the field of what we will call the 'social'. The moment of antagonism where the undecidable nature of the alternatives and their resolution through power relations becomes fully visible constitutes the field of the 'political'. (...) The distinction between the social and the political is thus ontologically constitutive of social relations. It could be called, to use a term from Heidegger, an 'existential'. But the boundary of what is social and what is political in society is constantly displaced« (Laclau 1990, 35). Since social relations »can be radically transformed through struggle« (Laclau 1990, 36) we can identify behind this boundary the category of *politics*. There we have the three registers or instances in the Laclauian conception: first, the Political as governed by the logics of the Antagonism (pure »temporality«), second, the social in the sense

<sup>1</sup> Reactivation means the political shaking up of the sedimented layers of the social: »Reactivation does not therefore consist of returning to the original situation, but merely of rediscovering, through the emergence of new antagonisms, the contingent nature of so-called 'objectivity'« (Laclau 1990, 34)

of sedimented forms of objectivity (pure »spatiality«) and third politics (reactivation of social sediments).

table 1:

<i>the Political</i>	<i>politics</i>	<i>the social</i>
Antagonism	antagonisms	society as horizon
temporality	hegemonization of time by space	spatiality
collapse of signification	empty signifier	signifying system
undecidability	decisions	forgotten origins of decisions
constitutive outside of every objectivity	reactivation	sedimented forms of objectivity
event	fidelity (Badiou), dogmatism (Althusser)	presence (Derrida)

### *New (order)*

Hopefully the remarks given above have prepared the terrain and the tools for a discussion of how avant-garde politics (or arts) may to work under conditions of a growing impossibility of avant-garde. Obviously there is a whole bunch of different ideas about *what* exactly avant-garde is. We concentrate on three major attributes. Avant-garde is – in its own view – *new* (»progressive«), *sectarian* (»particularistic«) and *dogmatic* (»universalistic«). Our thesis is that these three attributes are closely interconnected in classical avant-garde, and the only way to rescue some ideas and practices of avant-garde as *post*-avant-garde depends on our ability to establish the interrelated paradoxes of a *non-teleological progressivism*, an *empty und relative universalism* and an *asymmetric particularism*. We will dwell on this later.

First, let us have a look on the central category of the avant-garde, the *New*. Nothing seems more *depassé* than the *New*. After everything said before, we must claim that the *New* is a concept of radical exteriority, of something that doesn't exist, but under certain circumstances may create a myth, i.e. a space of inscription, which is ordered around precisely this empty signifier of »the *New*«. But what required of »newness« in order to become an empty signifier? If a given system heavily relies on notions like »tradition«, »customs«, »uncontested rules«, »the glorious past«, etc., then, in a moment of crisis and growing dislocation, the resistant factions will start signifying their opposition in terms of »the new« and a rhetorics of »novelty«, »unprecedance«, »rup-



ture«. We are facing a phenomenon of absolute sublimity, as it was the case in the French Revolution. The problem is that, according to the the signifiatory logics, as soon as we can sufficiently describe *what the new thing is*, then it is not new anymore – it is already part of the known, »the old«. Thus, »the New« points at the outside of signification, it is the name for the instance of temporality in the Laclauian sense. So we can claim that newness has *no object*.

What does it mean to say that – in a »modernist«<sup>2</sup> conjuncture – the event will be conceived as *sublime*. It is not for nothing that the French revolution has been experienced according to the aesthetics of the Sublime. The whole metaphoric arsenal of the Sublime – descriptions of the revolution as storm, hurricane, maelstrom, landslide, earthquake, volcanic eruption – can be found in the reports of visitors (revolutionary »tourists«) of the events of 1789. Laclauian political theory may help us to understand the close relationship between the revolution and the Sublime. If we see sublimation as a process of *emptying out* centred around the category of the empty signifier then we can give it a discourse analytical theorization starting from – the both necessary and seemingly contradictory assumption – that an empty signifier must be radically empty *and* »more or less« empty at the same time.

On one hand, during the process of its hegemonization/universalization/ purification any political signifier (like »democracy«, »freedom«, »revolution« etc.) gradually loses more and more of its specific content. This is the problem of any alliance or coalition: the more social groups join in their articulation of certain demands the smaller is the extent of demands which all participants are prepared to endorse (this may be called the logics of compromise). Here, floating signifiers – more or less empty – simply indicate antagonisms which are criss-crossing the political field.

But on the other hand, though, the empty signifier is not simply evacuated of its specific signifieds step by step, it also »signifies« that which lies beyond signification, its constitutive outside. It is precisely because of this sublime

<sup>2</sup> Laclau speaks of »democratic struggles where these imply a plurality of political spaces, and of popular struggles where certain discourses *tendentially* construct the division of a single political space in two opposed fields. But it is clear that the fundamental concept is that of 'democratic struggles', and that popular struggles are merely specific conjunctures resulting from the multiplication of equivalence effects among democratic struggles.« (Laclau/Mouffe 1985, 137) Revolutionary or popular struggles are clearly accompanied by a certain rhetorical pathos (as we find it in manifestos). The »emptier« a signifier is the more struggles it can unite under its banner. It is in this sense that we speak about a modernist conjuncture. Although the »conditions of political struggle in mature capitalism are increasingly distant from the nineteenth-century model of a clear-cut 'politics of frontiers'« (Laclau/Mouffe 1985, 133) the empty signifier appears as truly sublime signifier only in a modernist conjuncture, in a situation of a »politics of frontiers«. The pathos of decision and revolutionary rhetorics are necessary to emotionalize and motivate people during a popular struggle.

signification of the *absent fullness*, of the outside of the signifying system as such, why the empty signifier is able to sew the political field. As we said, in Laclau this outside of signification is conceived as something which threatens the signifying system, as Antagonism. This profound Antagonism can only *show* or *reveal* itself as an event (because the collapse of signification can't be a part of signification, in this case it would be no collapse: »if the event was not essentially exterior to the structure, it could be inscribed as an internal moment of the latter«, Laclau 1990, 44). While the gradual sublimity belongs to the order of politics, the absolute Sublime belongs to the order of the Political. Hence, the Political is the name for the very moment of »openness«<sup>3</sup>, when the sedimented structure of society is radically questioned, as it usually happens in the case of revolutions.

So we can say – with Kant – that what is »represented« in the Sublime is unrepresentable formlessness as such, and we can say – with Laclau – that what is »represented« in the revolution is not the one or the other specific demand but the entirely empty concept of (*new*) *order* as such. It is the very systematicity of the old signifying system (of the *ancien régime*) which is under assault. Hence, the empty signifier »revolution« »symbolizes the very principle of spatiality and structurality«, that is, the proposed (*new*) *order*. But as far as this order is diametrically opposed to the existing (*old*) order, it symbolizes the very principle of temporality, the proposed *new* or *non-(order)*, even chaos and destruction. This *new* order has no content and no object.

It is precisely because of their objectlessness why avant-garde movements are dogmatic – dogmatic in the Althusserian sense. For Althusser, a true philosopher of avant-garde, philosophy has no object either. Marxism and psychoanalysis are radically opposed to a hostile outside – »bourgeois« ideology. This outside is inflected into the inside in form of revisionisms (Jung, Adler etc.), and thus it becomes inevitable to draw a line of demarcation between dogmatism and revisionism. Philosophy is even reduced for Althusser to the mere performative act of drawing this line of demarcation by declaring a

<sup>3</sup> As Pierre Bertaux mentioned, one could see even the Heideggerian category of Openness through Hölderlin's eyes as a revolutionary category: »Die Revolution ist Offenbarung und umgekehrt. Der Begriff des 'Offenen' wird später in Hölderlins Dichtung eine bedeutende Rolle spielen; er kommt etwa zwanzigmal in der Lyrik nach 1800 vor: Das 'Offene' enthält an sich schon den Inbegriff des Revolutionären, nämlich daß die Welt nicht mehr als ein Abgeschlossenes, sondern als ein Offenes erscheint, als ein Augenblick, in dem plötzlich alles möglich ist oder möglich scheint, was sonst unmöglich war« (Bertaux 1990, 66). The same holds for all the famous young pupils of the »Tübinger Stift«, who felt more than enthusiastic about the French Revolution. Hegel's philosophy, as the conservative philosopher Joachim Ritter has noticed, is revolutionary in its innermost motives: »es gibt keine zweite Philosophie, die so sehr und bis in ihre innersten Antriebe hinein Philosophie der Revolution ist wie die Hegels.« (Ritter 1977, 192)



thesis. So it is, in its very essence, a thetical declamation without any object. The resemblance between artistic and political avant-garde practices is striking. Not by accident the *manifesto*, a mere gesture of declaration, became *the* genre of every vanguard movement.

So we are confronted with the strange case of an empty and anti-essentialist dogmatism that keeps faith in its own objectlessness, and by defending the very principle of temporality against spatiality, avant-garde dogmatism opens a place for the myth of modernity/emancipation/enlightenment. The second table shows how this idea of avant-garde as political principle structurally relates to immanentism, monarchism and the project of a radical and plural democracy.

First, an avant-garde concerned with the *New*, works on the backround of an *empty* dogmatism since the *New* itself has no object. Second, classical avant-garde still sees itself as being in a symmetric, that is, necessary relation to the empty universalism of newness: a privileged particularity ready to incarnate this universality. However, an *asymmetric* dialectics between particularism and universalism, between politics and the Political, between the empty signifier and the (absent) fullness, between the signifying system and its constitutive outside, in fact became feasible after the democratic invention.

table 2:

	full universalism (=foundationalism)	empty universalism (=anti-essentialist »dogmatism«)
»expressive« incarnation	immanentism	avant-garde/jacobinism
asymmetric incarnation	monarchism	democratic pluralism

Let us concentrate on the right side of this table. A good example for an empty universalism might be democracy in the Lefortian sense, where, after the decorporation of the king, the place of power became empty. There is no essence of democracy, precisely because democracy is lacking any grounding by a transcendent power. But how to keep the place of power empty?

### *Jacobinism*

Now, jacobinism and its avant-garde successors adopted the role of the expressive (that is necessary) incorporation of the universalism of the empty place of democracy or the impossible »newness« of revolution. The avant-garde, thus, is positioned in a non-contingent relation to the empty signifier, while at the same time *accepting* the radically empty character of this signifier und keep-

ing it empty »by all means necessary«. Thus, it is on the one hand opposed to any form of immanentism which doesn't accept the empty character of its foundations. Immanentism – following Jean-Luc Nancy – quite on the contrary, supposes the essential identity between universality and incarnatory object, the junction of outside and inside, or the »communion« of community and leader. But on the other hand avant-garde is also opposed to monarchism, where a contingent, particular object (the hereditary monarch) represents universality. However, even if their relation is an asymmetrical one, the place of power is not empty in monarchism – we will come back to that later.

Given that the Jacobin particularism »expresses« the emptiness of the empty place of power by occupying it, we will encounter a first problem with jacobinism. For under conditions where the public sphere is not *one* but *multiple* we can't anymore speak about *the* unique empty place of power. There will be a multiplicity of empty power places<sup>4</sup> (to be occupied/constructed or not) on every single level of society. Under these conditions the instance of power is still empty, but it is not unique, that is to say, we will neither find nor be able to construct the one and single nodal point which has the capacity to suture society as a whole. This was part of the Jacobin fantasy. Therefore it doesn't suffice to save the empty universalism of democracy on the parliamentary level alone.

To suppose such an »expressive« and non-multiple empty universalism can even get us into a deadlock resembling a systems theoretical paradox, as it is the case with the Algerian experiment. A paradox arises if we look at the very distinction between the two terms of the basic binary code of a system through the eyes of one of these very terms. Supposed the Algerian code reads »democracy vs. fundamentalism«: Is it democratic or is it fundamentalistic to draw a line of demarcation between democracy and fundamentalism? Is it democratic to abolish democracy – if there is majority in favour of fundamentalism? Or is it fundamentalistic to stick to democracy against the will of an anti-democratic majority?

If we restrict our notion of democracy to a representational majority principle (thereby excluding the questions of human rights, of an open public sphere, etc.), that is to the battle for the single empty place of *representational* power, then the Algerian military junta and its fight against immanentism is a modern example for the (strategic) Jacobin paradox: In order to save democracy we

<sup>4</sup> »Social dislocation is therefore coterminous with the construction of power centres. But given that the possibility of resistance to that power means that the latter is not a total power, the vision of the social emerging from this description is that of a plurality of power centres, each with a different capacity to irradiate and structure. That is what is meant by a decentred structure: not just the *absence* of a centre but the *practice of decentring* through antagonism« (Laclau 1990, 40).



have to abolish democracy. The rousseauesque idea behind the dictatorship of freedom is that the only way to build a reign of freedom is to *force* people to be free. Jacobinism defends the empty universalism of democracy by expressively incorporating it.

Fundamentalism, on the other hand, perceives itself as the incarnation of a supposedly coherent body of holy texts, rules, customs and traditions – parts of a full universalism – and uses democratic elections strategically in order to overcome democracy. From this point of view fundamentalists don't face a paradox since for them there is no empty place of power to be protected. The place of power is already occupied by the transcendental body of the Lord as well as by His direct and symmetric earthly incarnation – the fundamentalist religion. The immanentist has not yet experienced the simultaneous decorporation of the King's two bodies. S/he takes the empty signifier for a »full« signifier – overflowed by a transcendental signified.

The conclusion we draw from this example is that we should avoid both the idea of a single place that has or has not to be occupied by an avant-garde party with an intrinsic and privileged relation to this place, and, as a consequence, the idea of a single place that has to be occupied by a particularism which relates to this place in an asymmetric and *purely* particular way, as it is the case with the Hegelian monarch. For Hegel, the physical body of the hereditary monarch is thought as the material complement to rational universality precisely *because* it is alienated of any universal grounding. It is in this sense that Slavoj Žižek could propose a kind of Lacano-Hegelian monarchism. For Žižek, the monarch defends the emptiness of democratic power by reversing the Jacobin strategy and occupying the empty place with its own contingent, non-necessary body.

However, it is rarely more than a Hegelian joke to take the monarch as representative of an empty universalism. The only universality represented by the monarch is the principle of monarchy; the only thing the particular, contingent body of the monarch does point at is the transcendental body of the monarch – and not the principle of democracy. In this sense the empty signifier »monarch« is nothing else than the – however asymmetric (=biologically contingent) – incarnation of the transcendental signifier »monarchy« (or »rationality« in Hegel), but there is no way for »monarch« to signify »democracy«. Only a *monarchy without monarch* could do so. But such a monarchy without monarch, in which a plurality of social actors – each of them being equally entitled – compete in order to temporarily signify the empty places of power, cannot be called a monarchy anymore – it would simply be a democracy.

What remains now is the quite ordinary idea of democratic pluralism. But here

we arrive at the whole point of our argument. In what follows we will claim that there is no feasible democratic pluralism without an element of avant-garde jacobinism. In the course of our argument we will focus on the right side of table 2, the side of empty universalism or dogmatism, and we will split up both the categories of jacobinism and pluralism into two tendencies each: a pragmatic or strategic dogmatism on the one side, and a theoreticist dogmatism on the other. What we will get is table 3:

table 3:

	pragmatism (strategic dogmatism)	theorism (»dogmatic dogmatism«)
avant-garde democracy	Leninism (Necaev)	démocratie à venir (Derrida)
post-avant-garde democracy	hegemonic pluralism (Laclau/Mouffe)	dispersive pluralism (Lyotard)

The content of the whole table is dogmatic in the Althusserian sense: it is faithfully oriented towards a universality without object. This universality is just a name for the event. In the case of »dogmatic dogmatism« we may speak about an event *to come*, in the case of strategic dogmatism we may speak about an event *to be produced*. These are the two extremes on the modernist horizontal axis: here the avant-garde is confronted with democracy as an impossible task, an impossible object or good, that is never fully realized. This contraction of both a Lacanian and a Derridian concept is a strong element in Laclau/Mouffe: »Central to this approach is the awareness that a pluralist democracy contains a paradox, since the very moment of its realization would see its disintegration. It should be conceived as a good that only exists as good so long as it cannot be reached. Such a democracy will therefore always be a democracy 'to come' (...)« (Mouffe 1993, 8) This we may call a jacobinism without blood on its gloves. But this »negative« jacobinism that merely concentrates on the emptiness of the place of power without protecting it, without constructing new power centres, remains to a considerably high degree politically impotent<sup>5</sup>. It may be a highly ethical stand, but it is not a political one.

<sup>5</sup> An Althusserian would claim at this point that the empty act of drawing a line of demarcation in the realm of theory certainly produces effects in politics. Even if we concede that – what we do – it is only under the assumption of a deterministic relationship between theory and the realm where the effects are going to emerge that we are able to foresee the *kind* of effects being produced. For example, our »correct« intervention in theory could have entirely counterproductive effects elsewhere.



On the other end of the modernist scale, though, we may find a purely strategic jacobinism: this is the Jesuit and Macchiavellistic tradition that leads to Blanqui, to Lenin, and later to urban guerrilla (the guerilla fighter as Jesuit of warfare<sup>6</sup>), the Black Panther Party, the Red Army Faction, and so on. Here, nearly everything is allowed in order to defend or construct the empty signifiers »revolution«, »freedom« or »equality« – all of them synonyms for the radical »new«, the sublime event. One of the best examples for such a stand is Sergej Necaev, the Saint-Just of 19th century anarchism. It would be difficult to find a concept more unspecified and empty than the notion of »revolution« in his »Revolutionary Catechism«. Almost nothing can be said about the revolution – it was Bakunin who called Necaev a believer without God and a hero without phrases. Revolution is not much more than the principle of the entire destruction of all traditions, laws and classes of the state. The revolutionary, according to Necaev, knows only one science: the science of destruction. Applying Saint-Just to Necaev we could paraphrase: What constitutes the empty signifier of »revolution« (the *New*) is the total destruction of what is not empty (the old). However, it is quite clear that Necaev's conspirational vanguard association stands in an »expressive« and necessary relation to this negative principle.

### *Post-Avant-Garde*

While in this Jacobin trend the idea of a strategy which allows everything in order to achieve the goal<sup>7</sup> may lead in the last instance to decisionism, the idea of *la démocratie à venir* on the other hand doesn't explain why democracy should be constructed at all (and not be simply awaited). The same with dispersive pluralism. It supposes a play or flux of signifiers without delivering

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<sup>6</sup> For Che Guevara the »guerilla band is an armed nucleus, the fighting vanguard of the people« (Guevara 1970, 15). The guerilla soldier can be called a Jesuit because of his »elastic positions«, which reminds to the »revolutionary elasticity« (Hannes Meyer) of Leninism. It is expressed in his »flexibility, his ability to adapt himself to all circumstances, and to convert to his service all of the accidents of the action. Against the rigidity of classical methods of fighting, the guerilla fighter invents his own tactics at every minute of the fight and constantly surprises the enemy« (Guevara 1970, 25)

<sup>7</sup> As an example we quote paragraph 22 from the German edition of the »Revolutionary Catechism«: »Die Assoziation hat kein anderes Ziel als vollständige Befreiung und Glück des Volkes, das heißt, der leidenden Menschen. Aber davon überzeugt, daß diese Befreiung und dieses Glück nur auf dem Wege einer alles zerstörenden Volksrevolution erreicht werden können, wird die Assoziation alle ihre Mittel und alle ihre Kräfte darauf verwenden, die Leiden und das Unglück zu vergrößern und zu vermehren, die schließlich die Geduld des Volkes erschöpfen und es zu einem Massenaufstand veranlassen muß« (Bakunin/Necaev 1980, 123). And paragraph 4: »Moralisch ist für ihn (the revolutionary, O.M.) alles, was den Sieg der Revolution unterstützt, unmoralisch, was sich ihm in den Weg stellt« (Bakunin/Necaev 1980, 118).

any concept of how they are going to agglomerate. Lyotard's »minoritarian patchwork« is one example, Deleuze's »micropolitics« is another one. Thus, the concepts of the right vertical axis of table 3 are, in a way, purely *theoretical*. They can't account for the articulatory process of fixation of meaning, the only thing they can account for is un-fixity.

But if Laclau is right in his assumption that the »way to overcome the temporal, traumatic and unrepresentable nature of dislocation is to construct it as a moment in permanent structural relations with other moments, in which case the pure temporality of the 'event' is eliminated« (Laclau 1990, 72), and if Mouffe is also right in her assumption that the democratic »coming to terms« contains the paradox of the absent event – insofar as every real event is an event 'to come' – then we have a situation of mutual contamination between a strategico-pragmatic jacobinism and a theoretical *messianic without messianism*. But there is the third term that has to be included: pluralism. Although we must say that a dispersive pluralism would be a self-defeating enterprise, pluralism as regulative idea can and must be maintained, since it disperses the »expressive« relation of the avant-garde party to the empty universalism – no single movement can claim to have privileged access to the latter. Quite on the contrary, a plurality of movements compete in order to incarnate the empty place of power, that is, to construct power centres.

Democratic-hegemonic pluralism is therefore not only adjacent to the other three boxes, it is even nothing without these elements.

1. Hegemonic pluralism acknowledges the emptiness of the universal.
2. Hegemonic pluralism remains oriented towards dispersive pluralism, since it doesn't believe in an a priori privileged role of any single element in politics. It is because of this neighborhood to a range of other particularisms that hegemonic pluralism keeps the possibility open to build a common chain of equivalence, while at the same time acknowledging that any incarnation will always be insufficient and asymmetric in relation to whatever universality incarnated.
3. However, hegemonic pluralism accepts the constant competition or power-struggles amongst the political actors in order to take the lead. Any single movement may temporarily take over the lead according to the logics of hegemony. Hence, it has to open itself to a kind of »dirty realism«.

So we actually *can* speak about avant-garde. An avant-garde, though, under conditions of the general impossibility of avant-garde. An avant-garde amongst other competing movements – none of them standing in the pole position of history. The direction has still to be negotiated. But different to other competing groups, this post-avant-garde has not yet lost any concept of the *New*. Progress towards the *New*, though, should only be negatively defined as a



movement away from the heap of ruins of history – not according to the apocalyptic picture as it was drawn by Walter Benjamin, rather in the sense of the pragmatic words of Bert Brecht: »Wirklicher Fortschritt hat als Ursache die Unhaltbarkeit eines wirklichen Zustandes und als Folge seine Veränderung« (Hecht 1986, 346). Otherwise post-avant-garde would have to claim a superior knowledge about the future – what would clearly be absurd.

Post-avant-garde, thus, doesn't anymore occupy a privileged position but simply a position that keeps faith in the entirely empty and groundless event of the *New* as opposed to the old. Post-avant-gardists would have to reformulate Alain Badiou's *hypothèse fondatrice* (»Il y a une capacité politique ordonné à la non-domination«, Badiou 1985, 61) into: *Il y a une capacité politique ordonné au non-passé*<sup>8</sup>. This hypothesis is what it is, a hypothesis, an assumption. Not more. And since the possibility of emancipation (= non-domination) is hypothetical, *engagement* cannot logically be derived either: »L'engagement est axiomatique« (Badiou 1985, 76). Considering the axiomatic character of every engagement, be it radical, resistant or avant-garde, we can only repeat the poignant words coined by »Nike« for their sneaker-ads: »Just do it«.

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<sup>8</sup> If we were traditionalists we would obviously enforce a kind of »politique ordonné à la tradition«. But usually traditionalists don't formulate their politics as a mere hypothesis. Post-avant-garde, which is »non-passé«, is entirely non-grounded, an empty universalism, while the sedimented forms of tradition fill the traditionalistic universalism. Traditionalists – despite the empty character of the *signifier* »tradition« – will always be prepared to give an exhaustive description of the contents of their traditions. They can do so because they assume a *symmetric*, that is *non-hypothetical* relation of their particular traditions to the universalism of »tradition«. The average traditionalist doesn't keep his/her universalism open as an empty place. Quite on the contrary, s/he is eager to fill it up with a whole bunch of supposedly eternal, sedimented particular customs. On the other hand it is true, that a traditionalism without traditions – resp. with »traditions to come« – would exactly be the same as a messianism without messianism in the sense Derrida, Benjamin or Russian cosmists have in mind. This goes for every signifier we may put into the slot. It is simply a question of the structural relation between particularism and universalism, and not of the specific signifiers we use.

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