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## **Time revival: sovereignty on the limits and the myth of our time**

### Overview of the argument

Sovereignty, which has been the cornerstone of the Westphalian system of states, has been contested from many sides, to the point that it is taken for granted that “sovereignty is in crisis” and that this crisis foretells its transcendence, abolition or radical transformation.

Is a spatial politics a liminal condition which cannot be trespassed or can we imagine what a politics of temporality might be? Agamben, Deleuze, Hardt and Negri, amongst others, have baldly tried to envisage a world politics beyond history and beyond sovereignty. Rob Walker, who, like Derrida, stands in a more ambivalent position, wants to transcend sovereignty but has nevertheless conveyed the difficulty with the following words:

Schmitt’s world is a condition of absolute spatialities. Modern sovereignties were enabled by a capacity to fix exceptions on a territorial terrain and to imagine a world of spatialized subjectivities in a world of spatialized communities. This was an extraordinary achievement, though not one that can keep itself up forever. As we seek to recover the problem of sovereignty from

the demands of a modern sovereignty of spatialized states, we may indeed come to see that sovereignty does have more to do with life, with being in time, than it does with the freezing of human life in territorial space. But it will take some imagination to rethink the origin of origins and the constitution of limits in temporal terms (...) as the condition under which politics (...) can be imagined at all<sup>1</sup>

I have taken issue with the thesis that sustains that the current crisis of sovereignty is a transitory and necessary passage before the recovery of universal history into a cosmopolitan horizon without antagonism or sovereign limits. I have termed this thesis “the spatial demise and time revival thesis” and found that it comprises three tenets: first, the assertion that modern politics is “spatial politics”; second, that spatial politics entails a negation of politics or “deferral of politics”; and third, the tenet that the crisis of spatiality conveys a “restoration of time”, purported as the dawn of a universally inclusive politics beyond sovereignty.

My argument negates the major premise of the “spatial demise and time revival thesis”, namely, the assertion that modern politics is spatial politics. In brief, I sustain that temporality is the modern myth: above and beyond, modernity is a chronolatry.

I contend that sovereignty and modern politics are precisely a form of “time politics” before anything else; a form of organizing political authority by means of separating spaces within which cooperation is possible and progress may take place, from the realm of the international, in which the history of war as an ever present possibility has the upper hand. From this point of view, the purported “deferral” of the political in international relations is the guaranty that distinctions can be made and that a plurality of “histories” can develop. I believe that the necessity of making distinctions is a “liminal” condition of human life, which is always political and anchored in space and time, rather than in fantasy.

I sustain that the post-sovereign and post-historic view on international relations is a form of theologically informed thinking that negates the political. I also suggest that

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<sup>1</sup> Walker, RBJ; “Sovereignties, Exceptions, Worlds”, in Edkins, Jenny, and Pin-Fat, Véronique (edits) *Sovereign Lives, Power in Global Politics* (Routledge, New York and London 2004) p. 249

the key to explain its rationale lays in the “time revival tenet”, namely, the predicate that there can ever be an end to sovereignty which announces a new historical epoch. In the following pages I will try to show that the post-historic stance is heavily indebted to a typically Western onto-theological constitution of Universal History as the single or monopolistic master narrative which justifies the so called “acceleration of time”. From this point of view, I will argue, those anti-sovereign philosophies do not break with the modern and Western view of things that they explicitly reject.

I will take my bearings mainly for Odo Marquard, the sceptical philosopher who has indicted modernity as counter-modernity or re-edition of theology. I will use Marquard’s argument to explain that those post-sovereign and post-historical philosophies are a mere nihilistic accentuation of that theological constitution they denounce (an “acceleration of the acceleration of time”), rather than a plausible political alternative.

For the most part, I have drawn my spatial demise/time revival argument upon a reflection on Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* and Derrida’s problematique of the “end of history”. Although the paper focuses on the purported assertion of a new form of historicity beyond power and sovereignty -the third tenet of the spatial demise/time revival argument- it also puts forward a way of looking at the relation between sovereignty and what I have called “the liminal” from the point of view of a hitherto predominantly aesthetic category: “the sublime”. Finally, I sustain that Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* and Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* may be read as an attempt to conceptualise an idea of the political as “sublime”, which in my opinion presents serious problems for the taming of war.

### 1-The spatial demise and time revival thesis

RBJ Walker has deployed a critique of sovereignty at the level of “basic ontological assumptions” about space and time and has pointed that it is precisely a particular idea of space and time that has produced the kind of institutions and international relations that exist: “the discourse of sovereignty legitimises modernity, taming time by

enclosing spaces”<sup>2</sup>. According to Walker, the foundational act of modernity was to draw a line or discrimination between self-contained spaces, so that the demarcation of a “here” and a “there” (inside/outside) was seen as the condition of possibility of the good life and progress within spatial borders and, at the same time, the recurrence of war (“anarchy”) outside. Hence, modernity is for Walker the moment of separating spaces on the one hand, and on the other, of containing temporality itself (history and progress) within sovereign limits. Sovereignty, Walker explains, operates by means of enclosing spaces and separating the time of history (progress and peace) from the time of anarchy (recurrence of war) or time of repetition. In other words, sovereignty is the modern privileging of space over history:

A spatial order in which history can unravel as it should and a spatial disorder in which contingent forces can only clash as they must<sup>3</sup>

In summary, Walker explains that the coming of age of sovereignty is a story about redrawing the spatio-temporal boundaries or re-setting the limits in the horizontal plane of a plurality of sovereign spaces:

This was a shift that required redrawing the line that was previously drawn between earth and heaven...a line drawn on a vertical axis of above and below. It was redrawn as a line between man and world... (a line) between states. It was a line drawn on a horizontal rather than a vertical axis<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, current world politics is for Walker characterised by a deep challenge to the modern horizontal demarcations by means of temporal acceleration<sup>5</sup>, with the effect that the concept of state sovereignty has been discredited. Therefore, in his view, the current predicament is such that the experiences of temporality and velocity

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<sup>2</sup> Walker; “International Relations and the Concept of the Political: A Politics of Space”, in Booth & Smith, *International Theory Today, Positivism and Beyond* (CUP, 1996), p. 331

<sup>3</sup> Walker; Walker; *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993) p. 177

<sup>4</sup> Walker; “Both Globalisation and Sovereignty: Reimagining the Political”, Policy Brief, Centre for Global Studies, in [www.globalcenters.org](http://www.globalcenters.org)

<sup>5</sup> The “acceleration of history” is a recurrent theme in authors like Baudrillard and Virilio; *Vid.* Virilio, Paul; *Speed & Politics*, (New York, Semiotext(e), 1996)

are changing rapidly the circumstances under which sovereignty proved its performance<sup>6</sup>. Walker has employed the term “Chronopolitics”<sup>7</sup> to convey the geographical contraction, the sense of the fragmentary and the acceleration of events. Very crucially, Walker has affirmed that we are living at the time of “a crisis of political consciousness arising from a loss of faith in universal history”<sup>8</sup>.

In *The Production of Space*<sup>9</sup>, a seminal work published in 1974, Henri Lefebvre sustained the thesis that modernity enthroned the “fetishization” of space in the service of the state, an event that took place in Hegelianism and, paradoxically, announced its immediate downfall in post-Hegelianism, setting forth a process which, it is argued, has continued to the present, featured as the moment of “the restoration of time”<sup>10</sup>. According to Lefebvre, the “fetishization of space”, depicted as “a millennia long privileging of space over history”, culminated an eventual discrediting of the spatial and the “restoration of time”<sup>11</sup>. In Hegel’s absolute idealism, space, history and reason are absolutely immanent to each other and framed within the “end of history” thesis, according to which the state has accomplished an unsurpassable historical or superior dialectical stage. As Lefebvre remarks, at that moment time loses all meaning and space reigns<sup>12</sup>

To recapitulate, Lefebvre saw in this contemporary “restoration of time” the reversal of the previous dominant tendency, the modern “fetishization of space”, and with it, the establishment of a time-concerned philosophical tradition which links Marx’s idea of “revolutionary time”, Lukács vision of a universal and homogeneous state, Bergson’s concept of duration, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, etc<sup>13</sup>

I find it extremely useful to look at this “time revival” trend as the inversion of Carl Schmitt’s spatial ontology. For Carl Schmitt, the world is “a condition of absolute

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<sup>6</sup> Walker; *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993), p. 161; p. 5

<sup>7</sup> Walker; “International Relations and the Concept of the Political”, p. 309

<sup>8</sup> Walker; *Inside/Outside*, p. 44

<sup>9</sup> Lefebvre, Henri; *The Production of Space* (Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 1998)

<sup>10</sup> *Op. Cit*; p. 21

<sup>11</sup> *Op. Cit*, p. 416

<sup>12</sup> *Loc. Cit*

<sup>13</sup> *Op. Cit*, pp. 21-22; note 27, p. 22

spatialities”<sup>14</sup> and order is always linked to spatiality and the inside (homes, cities, states) whilst disorder remains in the outside. Succinctly, the spatial demise and time revival thesis in authors like Deleuze and Guattari supports the idea that there is currently a decoupling of the spatial/temporal wedlock<sup>15</sup> which would put an end to the deferral or negation of politics, with two clear consequences: first, deterritorialization of subjectivities and political forms of authority; and second, a problematization of history. For Deleuze, time is “out of joint”<sup>16</sup> and has been finally liberated.

The notion that our contemporary experience of space has been altered to a point in which the same idea of “history” becomes problematic has been a favourite topic within postmodernist literature. For instance, Jameson’s cultural analysis of late capitalism (in which Jameson sees the definitive triumph of culture over nature by means of a universal commodifying process of cultural consumption) has argued that in postmodernism, the idea of modernist progress collapses and no real history, only personal anecdote, can develop<sup>17</sup>.

The new horizon that this thesis heralds is typically a new kind of politics beyond spatial and temporal limits, articulated around desire (as opposed to logos) and “time to arrive” (as opposed to space), that literally, consumes and puts an end to all time. Zygmunt Bauman, for example, has claimed recently that we have to call to terms with what he calls “the end of the era of space” and “the dawn of an ultimate horizon of universal history”<sup>18</sup>

Undeniably, some of the current approaches to the space demise and time revival theme are truly reach and stimulating, like Derrida’s deconstruction of sovereignty

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<sup>14</sup> Walker, RBJ; “Sovereignties, Exceptions, Worlds”, in Edkins, Jenny, and Pin-Fat, Véronique (edits) *Sovereign Lives, Power in Global Politics* (Routledge, New York and London 2004) p. 249

<sup>15</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix; *Capitalisme et schizophrénie. 1. L’anti-œdipe*, (Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1972), p. 38; as well, pp. 164-165

<sup>16</sup> Deleuze, Gilles; “Les Cours de Gilles Deleuze: Cours Vincennes : synthesis and time - 14/03/1978”, in <http://www.webdeleuze.com/php/texte.php?cle=66&groupe=Kant&langue=2>

<sup>17</sup> Jameson, F; “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, in *New Left Review*, July-August, n. 146, 1984. pp. 59-92.

<sup>18</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt; “Time/Space”, in *Liquid Modernity* (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2000), Chapter III, pp. 91-129

along the lines of an ontology of fluidity and pure temporality. Derrida's idea of history is twofold: on the one hand, his longing for a revolutionary politics beyond revolution is related to a notion of temporality which has been called "messianic". Nevertheless, Derrida explicitly opposed deconstruction to the "end of history" thesis, which he denounced as an ideological trick of liberal flavour and scant philosophical substance; we may recall media figures like Baudrillard, who famously claimed that "if we leave history, we also leave alienation"<sup>19</sup>. In other words, Derrida understood deconstruction as an expedient against the "apocalyptic tone in philosophy"<sup>20</sup> which accompanies much of contemporary "endism".

History for Derrida seems to be the always open possibility of something being different, and from this standpoint, he has tried to re-inscribe history within the political, which entails a marginalization of space. Derrida has attempted to imagine a revolutionary future politics beyond revolutionary power and to think how a "messianism" without the teleological component would be. He has tried to go beyond sovereignty, which is always *voyou*, (rogue) but as well beyond the cosmopolitan that he rejected for ontological and political reasons<sup>21</sup>. More to the point, Derrida argued that the power to terrorize is inscribed within the same idea of sovereignty: "the abuse of power is constitutive of the idea of sovereignty"<sup>22</sup>

In a nutshell, Derrida's question points to the need of transcending *politically* the authority of universal metanarratives without falling into the temptation of re-instating sovereignty, on the one hand, and on the other, rejecting the illusion that there can ever be something like a final form of human government. In conclusion, the conditions of possibility of universal history are the conditions of its impossibility.

On the heels of Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben has equated sovereignty with terror and has called for an "irrevocable exodus from any sovereignty"<sup>23</sup>. With that

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<sup>19</sup> Baudrillard, Jean; "The Year 2000 Will Not Take Place", in Grosz, E (edit), *Futur Fall: Excursions into Postmodernity* (PIFA, Sydney 1986) p. 23

<sup>20</sup> Derrida; *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 14-15

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, Jacques; *Voyous* (Galilée, Paris 2003); pp. 7-8

<sup>22</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 145

<sup>23</sup> Agamben, Giorgio; *Means without End* (University of Minnesota, 2000), p. 7

aim, he has envisaged a post-sovereign order devoid of exclusion and spatial groundings that rejects

Any attempt to ground political community in something like a belonging, whether it be founded on popular, national, religious, or any other identity<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, Agamben has proclaimed the coming of a new model of post-sovereign international relations, based on blurring the territorial limits and the assertion of a reciprocal extraterritoriality of communities, organised as “a-territorial” spaces in which there would be no more citizenship and no more sovereignty, but only be-in-exodus individuals<sup>25</sup>.

Agamben sustains that modern or sovereign politics is a death machine characterised by anarchy (global civil war) and “legal anomy”. In order to explain how this is possible, he has replayed a Schmittian and Benjaminian theme and has shown that there is a secret complicity between violence and legality (the exception and the rule founded by the exception). For Agamben, the political order has two symmetrical limits: the *homo sacer* and the sovereign, who constantly introduces the state of nature into society.

The current predicament is, according to Agamben, that the two antithetical faces of sovereignty cannot remain in equilibrium anymore and the whole series of oppositions which made political life possible have collapsed. As a result, “the concentration camp is the nomos of the planet”<sup>26</sup>. In his account, what defines the present time is an historical rupture of the old order which kept together territory and juridical order (Schmitt’s *Ortung und Ordnung*), mediated by birth within a particular nation<sup>27</sup>.

For Agamben, the Schmittian *Ortung/ Ordnung* lock of the classic period of sovereignty has experienced a double mutation or historical rift: an order without

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<sup>24</sup> Agamben; *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press, Stanford 1998), p. 181

<sup>25</sup> Agamben; *Means* (University of Minnesota, 2000); p. 23

<sup>26</sup> *Means*; p. 44

<sup>27</sup> *Op. Cit*, p. 42

localization (a temporal state of exception) corresponds now to localization without order (the concentration camp or space that “opens up when the state of exception starts to become the rule”<sup>28</sup> ). This double mutation has transformed the political system into a putative *dislocating* machine of death. For Agamben, it is not only that the Schmittian wedlock Order/Territory has broken apart; in effect, the current predicament does not derive from the breakdown of the old *nomos*, but more precisely from its total accomplishment. In other words, the Schmittian exception has become the rule and the only hope for Agamben is to dissolve the same threshold or limit of the political, which is sovereignty.

The way out for Agamben goes through “the end of history and the end of the state”<sup>29</sup> as the attainment of the last historical limit. That goal, he argues, demands to put an end to sovereignty and the instauration of a new politics built not around space but around temporality.

It should be clear by now, I think, that Agamben acknowledges European history as the teleological process of self-destruction ingrained within Western metaphysics, an old theme known since Nietzsche and Heidegger as the “theme of nihilism”. However, there are reasons to believe that he has not gone beyond the same narrative he explicitly rejects.

As we have seen, Agamben has tried to break apart with sovereignty and to abandon the political, out of the conviction that modern politics has reached an historical point of self-destruction and turned into a “dislocating machine” of death. Therefore, Agamben has tried to break away with sovereignty by means of its abandonment. Meanwhile, Hardt and Negri have attempted to break apart with sovereignty by means of the acceleration or accentuation of its own contradictions.

Hardt and Negri have seen in the present crisis the opportunity to push even further the movement of immanentization of power, a passage that would allegedly multiply the potential for the liberation of the masses. The purported objective of Hardt and Negri is to achieve what they call “cosmopolitical liberation” by means of abolishing

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<sup>28</sup> *Means*; p. 38

<sup>29</sup> *Op. Cit*, p. 110

the international system of plural sovereignties. For that reason, they argue that the modern world must be ruptured and smoothed.

*Empire* depicts itself as the frontline or culmination of an historical process of immanentization of political power and spatial breakdown; a putative temporal progression from transcendence to immanence which set off from the classic age of sovereignty (Bentham's world of the panopticon<sup>30</sup> and Schmitt's state of exception), then changed into Foucault's "discipline society" and most recently, has mutated into Deleuze's "society of control" and further into *Empire* itself, the new form of rule beyond sovereignty.

The "spatial demise and time revival" thesis operates in *Empire* under the postulate of "immanentism" and stands in an opposite extreme to Schmitt's concept of the political. In brief, in *Empire* "sovereignty negates the political and the political negates sovereignty".

First, *Empire*'s thesis of immanentism presupposes the spatial demise tenet or claim that "there is no outside" or "nowhere to hide"; Hardt and Negri claim that there is an historical movement of expansion of the "inside" towards the outside, or an interiorization of the outside

Second, the thesis of immanentism conveys a particular reading of history which opposes immanence to transcendence and proclaims the end of dialectics. To this respect, I will submit that *Empire*'s conception of temporality hinges on an eschatological notion of politics, a final revival of temporality which cancels history.

Thirdly, in trying to envisage a politics without sovereignty, *Empire* envisages the end of politics and the political. *Empire* understands the political not as an existential condition, as it is the case for Schmitt, but rather as *entelechia* in very metaphysical terms; in *Empire* the political is a "becoming political", as a *telos* to be attained or movement towards the re-appropriation of the multitude, an event which would signal for Hardt and Negri the aurora of a global democracy without limits.

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<sup>30</sup> Bentham, Jeremy; *The Panopticon Writings* (Verso, London 1995)

At this stage we may begin to see this view as a re-enactment of the conundrums of the “end of history” theme. Furthermore, it is not extravagant to say that for Hardt and Negri the actual end of history is precisely the condition of possibility of Empire. Briefly put, in Empire the becoming political of the multitude cancels history: *Empire* is a form of millenarian philosophy of history and a form of antipolitical nihilism.

*Empire*'s rejection of the historical paradigm is truly a form of political eschatology that posits the end of historical time and the arrival of an eternal present, by means of an exaggerated social constructivism which I believe barely hides a resolute transcendentalism. Thus, I believe that *Empire*, far from breaking apart with modernity and transcendentalism, is an acceleration of both: *Empire* is the opposite of what it claims to be. Also, it is not extravagant to call it “a sovereign of the latter days”.

## 2- From Political Theology to International Relations through Theodicy.

William Rasch has denounced the rise of a contemporary trend of theologically conceived politics, expressed in the form of a philosophy of history aiming at eliminating politics<sup>31</sup>. Ultimately, Rasch argues, that trend is a political theology inspired by the “salvation perspective” that point towards the final reconciliation or transcendence of all distinctions:

According to Niklas Luhman, “the monotheistic religions all seem to have a common underlying element, namely a salvation perspective. (...) They propose that every distinction can be sublated in a realm beyond all distinctions”. (...) Yet, this distinction between distinction and non-distinction can be made only from the mundane world of distinction itself. (...) To live in space and time is to be forced to live in (...) the difference between good and evil. It is only in time out of mind, in the beyond, the after-life or at the end of history, that the perfect state of indistinction can be achieved<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Rasch, William; *Sovereignty and its discontents, On the Primacy of Conflict and the Structure of The Political*, (Birkbeck Law Press, London 2004), p. 109

<sup>32</sup> Rasch, “Sovereignty and its Discontents”, p. 108

In summary, political theologies aim at a horizon of salvation, an expectancy which entails a particular view of historical time. One of the forms that political theology has taken historically is the forgotten discipline of rational theology, as well called Theodicy. Referring to the theme of theodicy and politics, William Rasch has written that

As a theodicy, the political becomes the instrument of perfectibility and thus a path to secularized salvation. With salvation, however, comes extinction, the extinction of the political; for as a theodicy the political must be fashioned as a self-consuming artefact<sup>33</sup>

A number of authors like Raymond Geuss, Odo Marquard or William Rasch have noticed the intimate relation, continuity or identity between philosophy of history and theodicy; Odo Marquard famously sustained the thesis of modernity as secularized theology and the resolution of both into philosophy of history as the modern theodicy of our times.

The aim of theodicy was to explain the persistence of evils (and political evil being chief amongst them) in a God's created world which is deemed rational and perfectible. Obviously, this was a "theological" concern. However, and this is crucial, theodicy's ultimate goal was to emancipate human knowledge and affirm human free will (which runs counter to the theological sway) by means of providing with an immanent explanation for the imperfections of the world, never more to be attributed to the divinity. Thus, Marquard argues, science (Leibniz's *mathesis universalis*) and modernity were made possible. In a nutshell, as William Rasch explains,

To show that this discrepancy between reality and expectation is either the fault of our perception of the world's constitution, or arises from the fact that the world is out of sync with itself and in need of correction<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Op. Cit*; pp. 109-110

<sup>34</sup> Rasch; *Op. Cit*, p. 109

Marquard has explained that theodicy typically employed “mechanisms of compensation”<sup>35</sup> (the clearest, Leibniz’s *bonum via malum* principle, or the idea that the total amount of good always outweighs evil ) which rendered contingency understandable and evil, “de-malified”, in order to absolve God of responsibility over it. Those mechanisms employed by theodicy (called altogether a form of *Konformismus*) were the ontological positivization of mutability or *acceleration conformism* (“so of the necessity of change we make the virtue of history”)<sup>36</sup> the “*bagatelierung des Übels*” (de-malification of evil or bettering the bad), the valorisation of transiency and, above all, the erection of Universal History as a gigantic mechanism of exculpation. The connexion of theodicy with the modern idea of history become clearer when, shortly after Leibniz’s *Theodicy*<sup>37</sup>, Marquard argues, theodicy became “philosophy of history” or the compensatory justification of modernity by means of “absolving history” and affirming the idea of progress<sup>38</sup>.

A point of the highest importance for the understanding of current negations of sovereignty is the self-defeating or contradictory character of any philosophy of history, which invariably constructs a mechanism of surpassing of history itself. Marquard has explained that theodicy is prone to self-consummation or to turn over into eschatology<sup>39</sup>:

Of the necessity of acceleration they make the virtue of surpassing in acceleration, which makes universal world history into the last judgement and the avant-garde into its judges: through acceleration conformism<sup>40</sup>

Hans Blumentberg has suggested that the thesis of modernity as secularization and secularization as a continuation of theology by other means (a thesis that he has criticised as deterministic) affirms that

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<sup>35</sup> Marquard, Odo; *Farewell to Matters of Principle* (Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1989), pp. 44-45

<sup>36</sup> Marquard; *In defence of the Accidental*(Oxford University Press, Oxford 1991), p. 56

<sup>37</sup> Leibniz, G. W; *Theodicy, Essays on the Goodness of God, the freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*; (Open Court Publishing, London 1988)

<sup>38</sup> Marquard; *In defence*, p. 56

<sup>39</sup> *Op. Cit*; p. 17

<sup>40</sup> *Op. Cit*; p. 59

The modern historical consciousness is derived from the secularization of the Christian idea of the salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*) and, more particularly, of providence and eschatological finitude<sup>41</sup>

The “modern historical consciousness” that Blumemberg refers to, is for authors like Martin Wight, Rob Walker or Odo Marquard no other than modernity’s master metanarrative or self-justification in philosophy of history. In brief, the “secularization thesis” sustains that modernity is secularised theology, and that modern philosophies of history are the naturalization of the Abrahamic myth of redemption, which maintains a concept of history as the temporal excursion in between two poles: creation *ex-nihilo* and eschatology or consumption of time.<sup>42</sup>

Martin Wight, the international relations scholar of the English School, contended that a certain point international theory always slides into Theodicy or Philosophy of History<sup>43</sup>. In Odo Marquard’s view, philosophy of history is an optimistic expedient intended to justify progress and accelerate history towards its accomplishment, final telos or consummation.

A similar point has been made by Rob Walker, who considers all theories of international relations are “sedatives”<sup>44</sup>, since allegedly pluralist as much as cosmopolitans theories are always equally dependant on a universalist philosophy of history. In either case, he argues, our philosophies of history, drawn upon universal categories, are obsessed with “fixing centers” and “taming time”<sup>45</sup>. The *modus operandi* of cosmopolitanism, Walker submits, is set by the by the inclusion or exclusion in the universal history of humankind<sup>46</sup>; for pluralists, he contends, the converse mechanism supposes as well a universalist discourse about human

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<sup>41</sup> Blumemberg, Hans; *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (London, MIT Press, 1986); p. 26

<sup>42</sup> Vid. Loevitz, Karl; *Meaning in History; the theological implications of the philosophy of history* (Chicago University Press, 1949). (Quoted in Blumemberg’s *The Legitimacy* as Loevitz)

<sup>43</sup> Wight, Martin; “Why is there no International Theory, in *Diplomatic Investigations*, p. 33

<sup>44</sup> Walker, RBJ; *Inside/Outside*, p. 4

<sup>45</sup> Vid. Walker; “Both Globalisation and Sovereignty: Reimagining the Political”, Policy Brief, Centre for Global Studies, in [www.globalcenters.org](http://www.globalcenters.org); pp. 3-6

<sup>46</sup> Vid. note 30

temporality (the Augustinian separation between the imperfection of politics and the perfection of the city of god).

Susan Neiman has sustained that most of the philosophical speculation from the XVI Century to the present time should be understood as different reactions to the question of Theodicy<sup>47</sup>, which is ultimately the idea of self-justification of modernity in historical progress. Odo Marquard has contended that modernity is contradictory and ultimately dependant on theology: what defines modernity is a discourse of self-justification or philosophy of history (not “a” philosophy of history, but philosophy of history itself), an optimistic discourse that “proclaims a world history with the single goal and end of universal freedom”<sup>48</sup>. Odo Marquard and others, like Gianni Vattimo, have found that those universalistic and self-justifying claims have proved to be contradictory and self-defeating and that consequently, there cannot be a “universal history”, but a “multiversal” one with no immanent finality nor a single understanding of what to be modern means.

The idea that modernity is ultimately self-defeating is indeed a very traditional topic (Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*; or, more recently, Lyotard and Gianni Vattimo are noteworthy examples). However, the question whether modernity must be abandoned (John Gray), reformulated (as much of postmodernism contends) or completed (an issue that has for instance concerned Hans Blumemberg’s optimism or Habermas’ modernism) has been put aside by a maelstrom of obscure post-political visions envisaging a characteristic conception of historicity, obsessed with temporality and the theme of “endism”. I contend that those post-sovereign and post-historical visions are, nevertheless, purely “modern”, and thus, purely self-defeating.

Ultimately, those stances may be seen as a more philosophical response to the craze of “endism” which thrived within the context of a liberal triumphalism after the collapse of communism. We may bring to mind the infamous Fukuyama, who argued in the aftermath of September 11, in an article entitled “The west have won” that

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<sup>47</sup> Neiman, Susan; *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2002)  
*Vid. New York Review of Books*, June 12, 2003, in <http://www.susan-neiman.de/docs/book10.html>

<sup>48</sup> Blumemberg

Democracies and free markets will continue to expand as the dominant organizing principles for much of the world (...) we remain at the end of history because there is only one system that will continue to dominate world politics, that of the liberal-democratic west<sup>49</sup>

Jacques Derrida took issue with this contemporary "Fukuyama-esque" endism, which he nicknamed the "apocalyptic tone in philosophy"<sup>50</sup> and scorned it as anti philosophical and banal. Against them, he opposed the more philosophical tradition of the "classics of the end": Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Lacan, Bataille, Althusser, Barthes, Foucault, Deleuze, and Lyotard... For Derrida, if there was nothing to improve upon or beyond the purported "end of history", that could only mean the end of politics and political opposition. Therefore, Derrida took a sceptical stance towards the "end of all metanarratives" (like the end of Marxism), ever since this putative end would require the impossible stabilization of meanings (a crucial tenet in deconstruction).

For Marquard, "where there is theodicy, there is modernity"<sup>51</sup>. Marquard claims that philosophy of history inherited the idea of Judgement at the end of history or eschatological moment (idea of Universal History as Universal Judgement) from an older and almost forgotten discipline: Theodicy (as well known as Rational Theology, meaning to judge God or to put him under trial). In summary, for Marquard modernity is philosophy of history and the latter is a re-edition of the rational-theologian idea of "justification of God" called Theodicy.

What Rational Theology or Theodicy endeavoured to do was to explain the "problem of evil": that is to say, the compatibility of moral, physical and political evil with the existence of a just God<sup>52</sup>. Theodicy then attempted to "justify" or absolve God from

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<sup>49</sup> Fukuyama, Francis; "The West Has Won", *The Guardian*, London, October 11, 2001

<sup>50</sup> Derrida; *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 14-15

<sup>51</sup> Marquard; *In Defence*, p. 11

<sup>52</sup> Baker, Lyman, "What is theodicy: the problem of evil"; in

the imputation of responsibility over evil in the world, and to absolve God, theodicy devised a theory about the purpose and structure of history (the Christian relate of History as the story of Salvation).<sup>53</sup> This theologically conceived narration became – mainly in German philosophy- the discipline of Universal History.

To the question of why does universal history arise in the modern period, Marquard has answered that theodicy and modernity are inseparable. Theodicy became both possible (since a relative distance or immunisation form evils was achieved for the first time) and necessary for modernity to justify itself:

According to Burkhart, historical crises are “accelerated processes” (...) the tempo of alteration in conditions of life (...) advances; everything is in flux, and greater and greater speeds. This creates a need for mastering acceleration. Now, my thesis is that universal history (...) is an attempt to master acceleration through acceleration conformism<sup>54</sup>

For Marquard, Leibniz’s *Theodicy* justifies modernity by means of optimistic “mechanisms of compensation” (*Kompensationsprinzip*) and “conformism” (*Konformismus*)<sup>55</sup>. What Leibniz’s Theodicy explained was that contingency always happens for the best of reasons and that whatever the amount of evil, the total amount of good outweighs evil: hence, “we live in the best of the possible worlds” and progress can take place. According to Marquard, as Hans Blumemberg quotes in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*<sup>56</sup>, the absolution of God in Leibniz’s Theodicy becomes the “absolution of history” in philosophy of history, with is itself the optimistic justification or absolution of modernity.

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<http://www-personal.ksu.edu/~lyman/english233/g-evil1.htm>, (Kansas State University, Department of English), p. 1

<sup>53</sup> *Art. Cit*; p. 5

<sup>54</sup> Marquard; *In Defence*, p. 56

<sup>55</sup> Marquard; *Op. Cit*, pp. 21-24

*Vid.* Same author; *Aesthetica und Anaesthetica, Philosophische Überlegungen*, (Schöning, Paderborn 1989)

<sup>56</sup> Blumemberg, Hans; *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* London, MIT Press, 1986), pp. 56-61

As the poet Alexander Pope put it, “One truth is clear: whatever is, is right”<sup>57</sup>. Thus, time is “absolved of guilt” and the idea of Universal Judgment is secularised under the idea of Modernity as Universal Legitimation: modernity is about justifying modernity and accelerating progress.

In *Gklück im Unglück*<sup>58</sup>, Marquard has explained that modern philosophies of history are a continuation of the same self-justification of modernity: progress justifies that in human temporality, the total amount of good always absolves history from its shortcomings (like a war, or an earthquake, like the 1755 earthquake that destroyed the city of Lisbon and urged Voltaire to write *Candide* as a refutation of Leibniz’s optimism and the cosmopolitanism of the time)<sup>59</sup>

For the moderns, history progresses towards its accomplishment, being this *telos* or *eschaton* (last limit) the disclosure of scientific truth, universal emancipation and, paradoxically, the negation of history by the affirmation of the possibility of finally taming power and antagonism. Odo Marquard has found that this assertion of *telos* is problematic and the “most refined form of theology” or “atheism ad maiorem gloriam Dei”<sup>60</sup>.

In summary, the “secularization” thesis put forward by Odo Marquard explains that modernity, which does not break neatly with the theological past, has produced an optimistic self-justification narrative about temporality, (philosophy of history as the metanarrative of modernity) which is ultimately self-defeating. Marquard has called this metanarrative “the most successful myth of the modern world”:

The myth of the inexorable progress of world history toward freedom in the form of the philosophy of history based on the idea of revolutionary emancipation<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Baker, Lyman; *Art Cit*, p. 5

<sup>58</sup> Marquard, Odo; *Gklück im Unglück: Philosophische Überlegungen*, (Verlag Wilhelm Fink, München 1995)

<sup>59</sup> Neiman; *Evil in Modern Thought*; in the Prologue, Neiman writes: “The eighteenth century used the word Lisbon much as we use the word Auschwitz today”

<sup>60</sup> Marquard; *In Defence*, p. 15

<sup>61</sup> Marquard; *Farewell*, p. 94

In this manner, Marquard argues, *Geschichten* (a plurality of stories) became “*Die Geschichte*” or Universal History as the only path to human emancipation; *Geschichte* marked the end of “polymythical thinking” and the beginning of the monopoly of the modern “monomythical thinking” which sustains the belief in one single humanity and one good form of life. Quoting Reinhardt Koselleck’s studies in the history of concepts, Marquard has dated the birth of philosophy of history during the emergence of the “age of progress” as a self-conscious historical period:

In the middle of the eighteenth century (...) the philosophy of history (which comes into existence and receives its name then) proclaims “history” in the singular (“*die*” *Geschichte*”) as against the previous plural stories or histories (*Geschichten*). Since this “age of singularizations”, in which steps forward (*Fortsschritte*) became “progress” (“*der*” *Fortschritt*), freedoms became “freedom”, revolutions became “the” revolution, and, as I said, stories or histories became “history”,<sup>62</sup>

At this stage we may gain some insight into which the implications of the “end of polymythical thinking” are for the current international predicament. Marquard explains that it carries with it the absolute demonisation of competing views, which are rendered irrational or simply inhuman:

One who withdraws from this single history of emancipation, into individual stories, henceforth becomes an heretic, a betrayer of history, an enemy of humankind. At best, such a one is a reactionary<sup>63</sup>

In summary, Marquard’s view on this respect is straightforward: monomythical thinking is harmful, whilst polymythical thinking is healthy<sup>64</sup>. Marquard argues that the end of the plurality of stories –the state of storylessness- is antihistorical and dangerous. What happens when one submits to this monomythical power? Marquard responds that

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<sup>62</sup> *Idem*

<sup>63</sup> Marquard; *Farewell*, p. 95

<sup>64</sup> *Op. Cit.*; p. 9

Then, fascinated by the new myth of the sole history, one sticks to the path that is only supposedly the path to heaven on earth, and is in reality the path to the identity, on earth, of heaven and hell: to an integrated, all purpose identity<sup>65</sup>

The self-contradictory character of any universal history, or, in other words, its anti-historical character, has been explained by a number of authors in terms of the pre-modern and religious credentials of the myth of progress, an idea that, as John Gray contends, is “a view of human history that is found only in western monotheism”<sup>66</sup>.

Marcel Gauchet, in *The Disenchantment of the World*<sup>67</sup> and *La Condition Historique*, put forward the thesis that monotheism and secularization are one and the same thing, or in other words, that the absolutely transcendent god of Christianity is paradoxically the final stage in the total secularization of the world. As he writes in *La Condition Historique*: “le christianisme est la religion de la sortie de la religion”<sup>68</sup>.

William Rasch, pointing to the religious filiations of the post-sovereign philosophies, has concluded that

Secularization-if that is what one would still want to call it- is therefore not the culmination of a historical process; rather, it comes as the denial of all process, as the absence of all history<sup>69</sup>

Then, if my interpretation is correct, what Marquard, Gauchet and Rasch are arguing is, in brief, that the claims to universal history are always self-defeating: they are truly a negation of history or, as it is the case with Benjamin, a political eschatology or narrative about the end of politics.

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<sup>65</sup> *Op. Cit*; p. 103

<sup>66</sup> Gray, John; *Heresies, Against Progress and Other Illusions* (Granta Books, London 2004), p. 2

<sup>67</sup> Gauchet, Marcel; *The Disenchantment of the World, A Political History of Religion* (Princeton University Press, Princeton 1997)

<sup>68</sup> Gauchet, Marcel; *La Condition Historique, entretiens avec François Azouvi et Sylvain Piron* (Edditions Stock, 2003), p. 119

<sup>69</sup> Rasch; *Sovereignty and its discontents*, p. 88

### 3- The last end or termination of all ends

I suggest that if we apply this thesis to the “spatial demise/time revival” theme, many of the current discourses about temporality in authors like Deleuze, Agamben, Hardt and Negri and others can be seen as a mere recurrence of the riveting theme of theodicy, which is the acceleration of time and the paradoxical thesis of the end of history. From this point of view, those post-political and post-sovereign depictions do not break or depart from the historical movement they believe to surpass. On the contrary, there are strong reasons to think that they have not gone beyond the riddle of Hegelian history and metaphysics but, ironically, they have instead accomplished them as an ultra-modern form of nihilism, which Heidegger defined as destiny, dissolution or the historical movement of the West.

The “time revival/redemption” tenet is a misconceived theoretical attitude or a form of faith; it is as well an anti-political vision with perilous implications, which could be termed as nihilistic, in the uttermost Heideggerian meaning of the term. For authors like Benjamin, Agamben and Hardt and Negri, “nihilism” is the acceptance of evil as a part of human and political existence, or to accept the allegation that antagonism cannot or should not be eradicated. Very differently, I submit that their claim against human imperfectability is baseless and can be seen as a form of conformism.

Political Augustinism, for quoting a confronting view, used to insist that the “city of God” and the “city of men” cannot coincide, and that men are imperfect creatures. Such position conveys a sense of tragedy that Rasch has found to be the essence of the political: the political exists precisely because the good life does not; in Rasch’s words, “in a world that sees perfection as its goal, the end of politics is the end of politics”<sup>70</sup>. Very explicitly,

The political does not exist to usher in the good life by eliminating social antagonism; rather, it exists to serve as the medium for an acceptably limited

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<sup>70</sup> Rasch; *Op. Cit*, p. 17

and therefore productive conflict in the absence of any final, universally accepted vision of the good life<sup>71</sup>

Still, why is this “myth of termination of all myths” so dangerous? This idea that all humankind will be one day sharing the same form of life or the same political institutions by expecting a post-historical and post-sovereign globe negates the possibility of affirming a multiversal history. Very baldly, those visions of universal harmony barely hide an assimilationist ethos, the new imperative that Rasch has phrased as the commandment “the other will be included”<sup>72</sup>. As Odo Marquard has put it, one single world would be always be tyrannical.

I believe that it is not farfetched to say that the first and dire consequence of universal inclusion by means of the vanishing of sovereign borders is the resurrection of an older and more dangerous division: humans and inhuman, saved and damned; those included in the renewed universal history (the properly human, cosmopolitan and post sovereign) and those who awkwardly refuse to take part (the inhuman, undemocratic or sedentary populations). In other words, if we relinquish the horizontal limits that separate different spaces, the likely outcome is to reiterate the tyrannies of universal history, which is fatally prone to eschatology, as Marquard has showed.

Marquard has referred to this predicament as the flipping of theodicy into eschaton or apocalyptic judgement:

As universal history sees it, human beings more and more make their history themselves, they take over God not only his role as creator but also his role as the defendant in connection with theodicy. Inasmuch as evils continue to exist in the world, the only prospect of exculpation in connection with them-by this tribunal before which it is no longer God, but human beings who are accused by human beings. (...) Then, these other human beings have to answer (as the slow human beings who resist the increasing tempo of the process of history) fro the present state of affairs. (...) Human beings escape indictment for the evils of the present by becoming its avant-garde, because the avant-garde,

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<sup>71</sup> *Idem*

<sup>72</sup> Rasch; *Sovereignty and its Discontents*, p. 145

which is always swifter than the indictment, escapes the tribunal by becoming it (...) Of the necessity of acceleration they make the virtue of acceleration, which makes universal history into the last judgement and the avant-garde into its judges: through acceleration conformism<sup>73</sup>

One of the risks of the post-sovereign philosophies is what Marquard has called the “*bonum through malum idea*”<sup>74</sup> (to make good out of bad or through bad), a compensatory notion that for example, gives support to a “morally just war” in front of “unjust enemies”; enemies that become absolute enemies or “enemies of humanity.

In a different order of things, the compensatory mechanisms of the post-sovereign philosophies tend to unburden capitalist exploitation of blame, since exploitation becomes *necessary* or cooperative to achieve a final “cosmopolitical liberation”, and so on. Finally and paradoxically, the post-metaphysic, post-sovereign and post-historical ontologies of universal harmony are prone to excite and justify a permanent and universal war. Marquard writes that

Universal history is always driving at a finally in which human beings are compelled to deny humanity to other human beings, and thus to become, themselves, inhuman. Universal history (...) always runs the risk of losing humanity in its effort to save mankind (...) He who wants to be human would do better to be inert than to be universal<sup>75</sup>

To sum up the argument so far: Marquard has affirmed that theodicy, by negating the eschatology of redemption, made modernity possible<sup>76</sup>. But in the end, the dream of emancipation has turned into its opposite, and theodicy (the defence of modernity) flipped into eschatology (the purported end of modernity or end of history in its different versions).

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<sup>73</sup> Marquard; “Universal History and Multiversal History”, in *In Defence*, p. 59

<sup>74</sup> Marquard; *Farewell*, p. 44

<sup>75</sup> Marquard; *In Defence*, p. 59

<sup>76</sup> *Op. Cit*; p. 13

#### 4-Sovereignty and the Liminal

As a consequence of the discussions above, I draw the conclusion that there cannot be a politics of temporality in any meaningful sense that is not riddled with inconsistencies, and that such an event, were it to happen, would clearly mark the end of the political and the beginning of an apocalyptic global terror.

Additionally, there are strong reasons to suggest that the surpassing of sovereignty entails the rejection of legitimate political opposition and of different ways of life, which in international pluralism are made possible by the international system of sovereign entities and the real possibility of war.

I also suggest that we can conceivably look at the academic discipline of International Relations as the current re-edition of a purely Western historico-philosophical trend which departs from Theology and goes into Theodicy first, later into Philosophy of History and eventually into its self-negation in eschatological views of post-sovereign international relations. If we consider this hypothesis, we may see clearly that the post-sovereign and post-historical philosophies do not do away with the riddles of modernity and history or transcend them; rather, they oppose them “nihilistically” by a wholesome rejection of the political.

There is also a side implication in my hypothesis. I think that the attempt of radically transcend metaphysical thinking in politics - as for example in the attempt to de-ontologise violence (John Keane), or in the view that explains the political as a mere moment within the social (Badiou)- always render the political as an epiphenomenon of human life or an inconvenience to eliminate. Perhaps then we could pay some heed to Marquard’s assertion that “the history of metaphysics is the organ of scepticism”<sup>77</sup> and recall as well Derrida’s contention about the possibility and impossibility of a wholesome renounce to metaphysics. As Marquard writes:

Metaphysics is the cognitive department that has problems with it does not get finished; and theodicy is an exemplary instance of this. Metaphysics –not

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<sup>77</sup> Marquard; *In Defence*, p. 25

getting finished with problems- is not an opponent, but a human state of affairs, so that for sceptics, there can never be too much metaphysics. That is why the sceptic is enamoured of the metaphysics that produces so many answers that they neutralize one another, reciprocally, so they leave the problems open<sup>78</sup>

Could we conceivably think about a “new theodicy” (as Marquard puts it) or defence of political modernity and sovereignty, if not in metaphysical terms, then from the point of view of “the liminal” and always paradoxical traits of the human condition? I firmly believe this question to be the political task of the moment, and clearly not the quest for a “politics of temporality”.

Carl Schmitt, Foucault and Derrida have rejected the possibility of transcending history and rely on a realistic notion of the human condition. Conversely, Benjamin, Agamben and Hardt and Negri remain confident in the idea that the abolition of sovereignty opens the possibility to universal reciprocity and a new and truly universal history. However, I have contended that they herald an obscure *Zeitgeist* with perilous implications.

I would like to submit that one possible way out of this predicament can be envisaged by recalling a sense of the tragic, which informs the view that humans are violent and that history, as John Gray has put it

Is not an ascending spiral of human advance, or even an inch-by inch crawl to a better world. It is an unending cycle in which changing knowledge interacts with unchanging human needs. Freedom is recurrently won and lost in an alternation that includes long periods of anarchy and tyranny, and there is no reason to suppose that this cycle will ever end<sup>79</sup>

To leave in history is a trait of the human condition. William Rasch (on the heels of Carl Schmitt) has argued that the political is a “*Katechon*”, a theological figure that

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<sup>78</sup> *Idem*

<sup>79</sup> Gray, John; *Heresies*, p. 3

holds back and defers the “*eschaton*” or post-historical fulfillment of human temporality<sup>80</sup>:

The *Katechon*, the political, those human institutions that keeps us human, that keep us ensnared in our many, ordinary guilts-perhaps that is all we have. And to long for the divine destruction of the imperfect world of the political-perhaps this is the greater nihilism<sup>81</sup>

A number of voices like Jacques Rancière (who has nevertheless denied metaphysics of any lease on life), Chantal Mouffe (from an agonistic stance) or Danilo Zolo (from a critique of juridical globalism) have explained that disagreement and not accord is the first threshold of the political, and that politics is a practice of antagonism directed at taming the violence of ethics. Then, sovereign politics and the cultivation of the polemical, and not the longing for harmony may begin to be seen as an unsurpassable trait of human sociability which prescribes that the liminal political relation is not the “belonging”, but the “exclusion”. As well, that the unsurpassable liminal character of sovereignty carries with it the problem of organising differentiated communities in time, rather than abolishing time in favour of eternal peace (an idea sketched by Rob Walker).

Indeed, sovereignty faces its most extremes limits and its form may change beyond recognition, but there are reasons to believe that, as far we wish less dangerous international relations, the idea of limit itself cannot disappear from the characterization of the political.

In this sense, the existence of a plurality of sovereign spaces, in which different or antagonistic histories can develop, fights against the possibility of a single “story of the empowerment of a sole power to redeem humankind”<sup>82</sup>. Calling for a proliferation of myths (the more the possible) and a return to a “disenchanted polymythical thinking”, Marquard has affirmed the necessity for humans of having

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<sup>80</sup> Rasch, *Sovereignty and its Discontents*, pp. 97-100

<sup>81</sup> *Op. Cit*; p. 100

<sup>82</sup> Marquard; *Farewell*, p.97

Not only one unique history or story, or a few of them, but many of them. For if they (...) had only one unique history or story, they would be utterly in the power and at the mercy of this sole history or story. (...) Here the history of universalizations is one history among others: Universal History is a history to which we can assent only if its ready to be not the only history, but one –and by no means the most important-history among others<sup>83</sup>

Nietzsche, the slayer of Western metaphysics and last metaphysician, called metaphysics “the history of an error”<sup>84</sup> and a form of nihilism, arguing that metaphysics sustains the gratuitous belief in the permanently deferral of the fulfillment of a desire for meaning. Yet Nietzsche himself, who explicitly opposed tragedy to theodicy, wrote that “where there is space there is being”<sup>85</sup>.

Conversely, post-metaphysical thinking has since then attempted to de-essentialise the absolutism of sovereign spaces and has interrogated or rejected the liminal condition of sovereignty. However, it is my contention that this endeavour has paradoxically resuscitated a form of politics which has more to do with the obsessions of universal history and the very Western blindness towards the possibility of a pluriverse of ways of life.

### 5-The Liminal: The Sublime Gate of the Political

Aesthetics and politics come together again at times of international dissolution. Under the current world predicament, obsessed with spatial and temporal endings and beginnings, the crisis of sovereignty (which for Carl Schmitt is the first limit or threshold of the political) can be looked at from the point of view of the tension between the beautiful and the sublime. What does the sublime have to do with “the liminal”, and both with sovereignty? Were sovereignty to disappear, what would be of “the liminal”?

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<sup>83</sup> Marquard; *In Defence*, p. 67

<sup>84</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich; *The Twilight of the Idols: Or, How to Philosophize with the Hammer*, (Hackett Publishing, 1997)

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Blumentberg, *Op. Cit*, p. 22

One of the grounding ideas of Romantic representation is back, this time as a haunting political category: the sublime. From the work of Burke and Kant to Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, the presence of the excessive, heterogeneous object of desire and repulsion we call "the sublime" has enjoyed a visible standing in aesthetics, but as well and perhaps a more hidden but nevertheless not less founding position as a master political signifier.

One possible way of looking at the presence of the sublime in International Relations lays in Burke's classic distinction between the beautiful and the terrible, as the representation of the sublime. In Burke's definition of the beautiful object, a plurality of different parts are integrated in an enclosed totality, always circumscribed by a limit which allows the perceiver to comprehend it in a single act of perception; the beautiful thus consists on the harmonious disposition of different parts in a whole.

On the contrary, the sublime consists on the absence of limits and the identical succession of undifferentiated parts, which creates the impression of infinitude. According to Burke, the pleasure we find in the contemplation of the limitless is the closest in its magnitude and force to the most extreme pain and the threat of death. However, the work of art which tries to reproduce the sublime is harmless: the delight we experience stems from the distance between the object as an "artificial infinite" and the real possibility of being harmed. In summary, there is no pleasure without illusion; delight lays in the threat and simultaneous deferral of the threat.

The international system of sovereign states has been the *bibelot* or beautiful object of political theory for three centuries or so: a harmonious composition of independent units integrated in a superior unity made up of custom, law and the regulation of war. On the other hand, the sovereign state itself incarnates the terrible political object par excellence: an undifferentiated or self-identical device which presents itself as infinite, eternal source of any allowed fruition; the first limit or threshold of the political which demands that limits are drawn and distinctions made, creating the illusion of order and enabling war to reign beyond its limits.

For Walter Benjamin, as Giorgio Agamben reminds us, the modern state is the Baroque state based on the state of exception<sup>86</sup>. One of the most characteristic forms of expression of the Baroque period is the *trompe l'oeil*, a visual trick aimed at inducing awe that deceives the eye and creates an illusion by means of distorting the morphology of an object, presenting the finite as infinite, a game of hide and seek with a single rule: to keep within the limits of representation as an illusion.

In a way, the great illusion or enchantment of the sovereign was to make the terrible appear as beautiful. Giorgio Agamben (*Homo Sacer*) who on the heels of Benjamin wants to put an end to sovereignty as the threshold of the political, has declared that the sovereign is the terrible gatekeeper that prevents the link between violence and law from coming to light. Baudrillard (*Simulacra and Simulation*) says that the power of illusion is now over: further beyond Benjamin's loss of aura of the artistic object, the "symbolic pact" or distance between the real and the work of art, the possibility of fabricating "the unreal form the real" is over.

Following with the analogy, the historical collapse of the political that Agamben unveils can be seen as well as the rupture of the tension between the beautiful and the sublime. In other words, we can look at sovereignty as an empty space- the liminal- somehow and always keeping the sublime away from the beautiful, and the latter away for the first. To pay heed to this interpretation, the becoming transparent of the "legal anomy" and the constitutive violence that informs the sovereign means that the political can only be reproduced by the sublime and the instillation of terror.

Agamben, who endeavours to break the metaphysical complicity between the sovereign and the political, has argued that the heterogeneous and antithetical pairs of elements that sustained classic sovereignty separated above the social body (the tension between law and anarchy, *nomos* and *anomy*, legal

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<sup>86</sup> Agamben; *State of Exception* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2005), p. 55

right and violence) have collapsed into each other, melting into a terrifying dispenser of fear and turning the political system into a global apparatus of death. Then, for Agamben the illusion is over as well; the tension constitutive of the political is broken and the exception that constitutes the sovereign has become the rule. Thus, terror reigns.

Jacques Rancière defined the experience of the sublime as the experience of “disempowerment” of the mind and impending disaster<sup>87</sup>. Certainly, in many parts of the world the only task for politics has become the administration of terror and the state of exception; as a consequence, we are told that the collapse of the beautiful into the sublime is just the natural result of an historical process within the logics of sovereign politics, which (they say) must give way to the voiding of any distinction and a form of infinitude that, conversely to the terrors of sovereignty, would be bloodless.

Since the baroque reaction to Descartes’ classicism we have come to believe that the modern illusion is the spatialization of political authority and knowledge; sovereignty has become a misnomer for all what is repellent in the Western tradition: metaphysics of identity and logocentrism, authoritarianism and misappropriation of the political. On the contrary, I have contended that the modern obsession and villain of the story is not space, but universal history.

This modern obsession with temporality is an idea that appeared itself out of a theological concern and paradoxically, became the modern justification of history as progress. The riddle of history and temporality has served the purpose of enclosing sovereign spaces and drawing spatial demarcations, but as well to the impetus of voiding the frontiers and dismantling forms of authority.

My argument negates the major premise of the “spatial demise and time revival thesis”, namely, the assertion that modern politics is spatial politics. In a nutshell, the central tenet of my paper has been that spatial politics is always dependant on a previous understanding of temporal limits or history, which in

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<sup>87</sup> Rancière, Jacques; paper presented at Goldsmiths College, London September 2003

the Western world has taken the unique form of a discourse about first limits and a last horizon or *eschaton*, which paradoxically puts an end to historical time. My understanding, taken from Carl Schmitt and William Rasch, is that the political is an ontological relation that always entails drawing limits and setting the lines of demarcation, in other words, a form of discrimination. From this vantage point, sovereignty is the liminal concept par excellence and is deeply inscribed in the human.

Clearly, I would like to vindicate sovereignty. Sovereignty is a form of organizing political authority by means of separating spaces within which progress may take place, from the realm of the international, in which the history of war is an ever present possibility and the guaranty that distinctions can be made at all, so that a plurality of particular “histories” can unfold. I believe that the political and the sovereign are an expedient against the terrors of temporality, or, as William Rasch says, a “*Katechon*” (which is a theological figure that holds back the coming of the last judgement). As Rasch has put it, if we negate sovereignty and affirm a politics beyond spatiality, we’ll go back to the absolutism of the vertical limits between earth and heaven, the civilized and the barbarian, and the rightfulness of the liberal versus the absolute evilness of the terrorist.

In conclusion: By sustaining the thesis that the modern obsession is not space, but universal history, my aim has been to remark something quite banal but not without significance, namely, that the human condition is anchored in space and time, and that exclusion is the liminal proviso of the political. The liminal is a paradoxical stance that sets the possibilities and confines of human reciprocity within the threshold of sovereignty. From this standpoint, and retaking our main argument about the sublime and the beautiful, sovereignty can be seen as an always shifting and necessarily empty space that keeps terror away from political life by allowing a modicum of exclusion to take place.

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