

Kieran Aarons and Idris Robinson

Introduction: Three Registers of Destitution

When we first proposed this special issue in late 2019, a cascade of uprisings was sweeping the globe, from France to Hong Kong, from Puerto Rico, Chile, and Ecuador to Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran. This list, far from exhaustive, would soon be dwarfed by the events of 2020 and 2021. In fact, according to some estimates, “roughly two-thirds of all countries have experienced at least one major anti-government protest since 2017” (Carnegie Institute 2022).

Revolution does not, however, return the same way it left. And we do not take it up in complete innocence, as if we did not know why, for more than a century, it persistently failed. Despite their many tactical innovations, it is obvious that a strategic horizon capable of gathering the many fragmentary episodes of rage and dignity under a common truth is wanting. While this absence of a positive political horizon has led some to press for a return to traditional forms of organization or, alternately, for a new Madisonian moment by which to translate fugitive demotic experiments into durable public institutions, this special issue explores the possibility that a deeper paradigmatic break with the Western political tradition is not only necessary but is perhaps already under way.

In a 1975 interview, Michel Foucault ([1975] 2021: 277) insisted that, “in the end, we need analyses of power in order to give meaning to [the] political struggle that is now beginning.” In a similar spirit, when the militant research group *Colectivo Situaciones* (2011: 26) coined the term *destituent insurrection* two decades ago, it was in an effort to describe the first of the mass popular uprisings that have come to define our young century. Our current political moment began in earnest not in the activist summit of Seattle in 1999 but with the nationwide economic and political crisis initiated by the International Monetary Fund’s refusal to refinance Argentina’s debt in the autumn of 2001. This decision, which triggered a headlong collapse of the country’s banking system and the total discredit of the ruling party, was followed in short order by a popular insurgency and the declaration of a state of emergency. In the riots, blockades, and plaza occupations of December 19 and 20, *Colectivo Situaciones* glimpsed the emergence of a new mode of positive antagonism aimed at flattening the offices of sovereign representation without replacing them.

According to *Colectivo Situaciones*, a fundamental rift separates the form and content of political life in the twenty-first century from the classical paradigms of revolt and revolution, and it is the task of partisan thought both to describe this rift and to deepen it. The enduring richness of their attempt to map this new horizon resides in the threefold register *Colectivo Situaciones* (2011: chaps. 1, 2) assigns to the concept of *destitution*, which refers at once to a *political* form of revolt, to an *epochal* or “civilizational” implosion of subjectivity, and to an *ethical* task confronting those who must learn to move within and inhabit this fragmented terrain. As this special issue attests, the polyvalent nature of the term *destitution* has become an enduring feature of the debates surrounding it.

Refusal of Politics

If Marcello Tarì (2021: 13) is right to claim that all uprisings in recent years have been “undeniably destituent,” this is first of all because they exhibit a tenacious desire to tear down, dismantle, and cancel prevailing political representations and institutions, without proposing others to replace them. In this sense, the slogan of the Argentine uprising, “All of them must go, not a single one should remain,” expresses a basic disposition of our times. As Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen argues in his contribution to this special issue, what is political in such moments is precisely the gesture of “refusing ordinary politics,” regarded by many as a realm of “shenanigans, detours, ruses and delays.” Importantly, such a refusal need not appeal to universal normative values or propose alternative programs or solutions. What is at issue for Bolt

Rasmussen is less a negotiation or compromise than a form of “total” critique enacted in practice, which—by contrast with the twentieth-century legacy of insurrections, marked as they were by a preoccupation with questions of leadership and a fixation on seizing state power—“oppose[s] any kind of power.”

Although this revocation of representation is directed first of all at the transcendent offices of ruling political authorities, it also expresses itself immanently in the slogans, gestures, and ad hoc compositions that make up contemporary insurgencies, which display a consistent and pointed hostility to any centralized agency or organization that would seek “to represent, symbolize, and hegemonize street activity” (Colectivo Situaciones 2011: 47). As Colectivo Situaciones emphasizes, the Argentine movement laid waste not merely to the legitimacy of the state and its police but equally to the illusory promises of its official opposition. By attacking the managerial eschatology of the Left and the socialist movement, for whom the project of modeling the future often functioned as an alibi for pacification and compromises here and now, the uprising drew its sense “from the present,” thereby putting an end to the “period of illusions and waiting” (64, 48).

Such messianic deposition of politicized is never a peaceful affair. The state (along with its suitors on the left) has at its disposal an arsenal of counterinsurgent apparatuses designed to capture potentialities that twist free of the governmental mold and to reconsolidate the withering representations on which their fledgling power depends. The latter maneuver is best achieved not by denying the legitimacy of the event per se but by “constituting all that escapes through it” (emphasis added; Colectivo Situaciones 2011: 47). The simplest way to bury an event is to affirm it for what it *is not*, thereby quietly reframing the meaning of the conflict as such. Whatever the intentions originally assigned to the term, such is the primary function today of the category “constituent power,” which allows the forces of order to reestablish symmetrical stakes to popular conflicts, thereby restoring the terrain of representation along with it.¹ For this same reason, fidelity to the destituent truth of events like the George Floyd uprising entails combatting the facile and hegemonic frameworks of meaning thrown over it by its reactionary claimants and spokespeople (Robinson 2020).

An Anarchic Epoch

While the revolt of 2001 may have ushered in an era of a mass tumult without authors or subjects, the terrain had nevertheless been prepared for some time. Revolts in our day unfold against the backdrop of a deeper epochal exhaustion, one affecting the very ground of subjectivity.

In the early 1980s, Reiner Schürmann (1987) identified in our age a shattering of the *archai*, that is, those binding representations or metaphysical Firsts that previously gathered words, actions, and things into a coherent historical regime of presence. As Katherine Nelson argues in her contribution to this special issue, to describe our time as one of consummate anarchy means that the very “possibility of deriving political principles from principles of ontology” has entered into crisis. The depravity of our reigning political order is symptomatic of a deeper epochal *kenōsis* that has emptied out the foundational referents, dispersing the unique foci or ultimate grounds that once allowed us to peacefully live, construct, and govern ourselves (divine authority, reason, historical progress, etc.). On Schürmann’s reading, the crack through which our current abyss grew was already present at the onset of modernity, since the attempt to supplant the substantial ontological horizon of the ancient world with a “rational legislation” of reality could never secure anything more than a formal epistemological ground. The modern project was always a miscarriage, a botched exit, for the self-legislating transcendental subject was a broken measure from the start: a thin reed stretched between an ontological mooring without legislation, and a legislation without any ontologically constitutive status.² Yet this legacy of decline can also be approached through the experience of social and political collectivity. In an interview following the French banlieue riots of 2005, Mario Tronti (2008, 2022) and Adriano Vinale observe that, with the death of the workers’ movement, a collapse of the Western subject more generally is announced. In the horizonless violence of the riots by poor Black youth, we see the crisis of the “social” form of subjectivity as a “historical mode of presence” that once leveraged the entire person, inside and out, forming the privileged site through which political action attained its form. This crisis, which was already under way beginning in the 1970s, signals nothing less than the “end of modern history as such” (Tronti 2008: 33).

Seen in this light, the parodic cruelty of our political institutions appears as a hollow effort to “reinstitute figures of some authoritative First that in fact have been lost for good” (Schürmann 1988: 137). The various resurgent fundamentalisms of our time, from religious zealotry to right-wing constitutionalism, comprise a vast work of *archē*-mourning—so many efforts to conjure a principle capable of shoring up the authority of commandments. However, as Giorgio Agamben observes in this issue (and Tronti before him), the same must also be said of those who cling to “paradigms of conflict and struggle” that remain indexed, at base, to a desire to “realize the proletariat.” With the collapse of the principal economies, nor-

mative firsts, and political subjects of yesteryear, it is urgent not only that we drive whatever is left of the West's idols "into their tomb" (Schürmann 1988: 141) but also that we develop new strategies that avoid reproducing the existing order in new forms.

Whereas militant anticapitalists previously sought to introduce consciousness into the workplace from outside of it, the unity of the revolutionary project must now be situated outside of the "condition of work" generally (Tronti 2008: 36). Such a displacement would require not only that we extricate the critique of capitalism from the "cage" (42) of political economy to which Marx and his epigones had confined it but also that we break with the very form of the *social movement* handed down to us from the left wing of the twentieth century. As Tronti writes, "Social politics has suffered such a series of failures that we have reached the point where no positive evolution of it seems possible" (41).

This search, among theorists of destituent power, for a starting point outside of the laboring subject helps explain their frequent insistence that the concept of revolution must be "anthropological" in nature, a conviction that likewise nourished a persistent and ongoing dialogue with other antiwork currents of thought, such as surrealism; Ivan Illich and Jacques Camatte; and antistate Indigenous and Afropessimist approaches to (under)communism.³

At the limit, it may be that we need to abandon the very form of the political program as such, founded as it was on a metaphysical understanding of action as the realization of preexisting ideals or possibilities. In this case, the classless society would no longer be positioned as a goal to be realized in some prophesied future; instead, the central problem of communism today becomes ethical in nature: it is a question of understanding how our own lives, as well as "the immediate and concrete existence of the things that surround us," came to be neutralized, depotentiated, or "suspended," as if our very existence were "put in parentheses" (Agamben, this issue).

Destituent Ethics

To slip away from the space-time of politicism and economism, to recover our lives from the suspended animation to which the spectacle of crisis governance consigns them, the gesture of political refusal must give way to an affirmation of the "sovereignty of concrete experience" (Colectivo Situaciones 2011: 27–28). How is such an affirmation to be understood? In what sense can the *no* of political refusal be said to envelop a moment of ethical positivity?

A first answer looks to the shifting logic of revolt itself, treating the violent and transformative shock of partisan confrontation as an exemplary case of immanent ethics. Once the idea of a single and central representative drama splinters under the force of the event, participants in revolt are called to take seriously their own perceptions, their own reasons for fighting. In this way, the flattening of all transcendence to the level of a single plane of action coincides with a restoration of the capacity for ethical self-authorization. By drawing all powers down to earth, the force of destitution appears to revoke any felt need to authorize oneself by reference to a plane of reference ulterior to experience. At the same time, it is for this very reason that an ethics of immanent conflictuality carries with it distinctive risks and dangers. Efforts to distinguish revolutionary from bourgeois uses of violence, or sacrifice from martyrdom, must tread carefully if they wish to avoid terminating in bloody intractable conflicts. As Furio Jesi showed in the 1970s, such “cruel festivals”—deprived of mythological or metaphysical significance, yet no less vulnerable to the blindness of mythological consciousness—become a perennial danger in an anarchic age such as ours (see Aarons’s contribution to this issue).

Herein lies the great merit of those theorists working to develop the concept of destitution outside of and beyond the logic of revolt, in long-term experiments in autonomous anti-institutional collective life, whether among the Mohawk warriors in Tyendinaga or the Zapatistas in Chiapas or in the strategies of urban survival amidst the ruins of the Anthropocene, from Mexico City to the exurbs of America. If it is possible to collectively constitute ourselves *as* destituent, if neighborhoods or entire regions can self-organize autonomously against the rule of money, without succumbing to the temptation to reinstitute the political as a sphere separate from everyday life, then we need not await the Great Evening in which “another end of the world” becomes possible, for there are already glimmers of a life in common within the passing away of this world, here and now.

Notes

- 1 To cite but two examples, one may think here of how Chile’s uprising in 2019 was routed back into the juridical framework of a constitutional convention, and how the stakes of the George Floyd rebellion were carefully recalibrated away from leveling police stations to “defunding” them.
- 2 “A precategorical existence that calls for determination is no new sun worth leaving a cave for, nor is an ‘I think’ whose ordering agency is subsequent to indeterminate presence” (Schürmann 2019: 92).

- 3 A good example of this interdisciplinary, heterodox encounter is found in the papers delivered during the Undercommons and Destituent Power conference in November 2020 (see <https://destituentcommons.com/>).

References

- Aarons, Kieran. 2020. "Destitution and Creation: Agamben's Messianic Gesture," *Journal of Italian Philosophy* 3. <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/italianphilosophy/previous%20issues/volume32020/>.
- Carnegie Institute. "The Four Dynamics That Drove Protests in 2021." January 13, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/01/13/four-dynamics-that-drove-protests-in-2021-pub-86185>.
- Colectivo Situaciones. 2011. *Nineteen and Twenty: Notes for a New Social Protagonism*. Translated by Nate Holdren. New York: Minor Compositions.
- Foucault, Michel. (1975) 2021. "The Great Confinement: Interview with Niklaus Meienberg." Repr. in *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group*, translated by Erik Beranek, 266–277. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Robinson, Idris. 2020. "How It Might Should Be Done." *Ill Will*, August 2020. <https://illwill.com/how-it-might-should-be-done>.
- Schürmann, Reiner. 1987. *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*. Translated by Christine-Marie Gros. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Schürmann, Reiner. 1988. "On the Philosophers' Release from Civil Service." *Kairos* 2.
- Schürmann, Reiner. 2019. "Legislation-Transgression: Strategies and Counter-strategies in the Transcendental Justification of Norms." In *Tomorrow the Manifold: Essays on Foucault, Anarchy, and the Singularization to Come*, edited by Malte Fabian Rauch and Nicolas Schneider, 77–120. Zurich: Diaphanes.
- Tari, Marcello. 2021. *There Is No Unhappy Revolution: The Communism of Destitution*. Translated by Richard Braude. Brooklyn: Common Notions.
- Tronti, Mario. 2008. "Sul potere destituente: Discussione con Mario Tronti." In *Potere destituente: Le rivolte metropolitane*, edited by Pierandrea Amato, Tristiana Dini, Paulo Primi, Luca Salza, and Adriano Vinale, 33–44. Udine: Mimesis.
- Tronti, Mario. 2022. "On Destituent Power." *Ill Will*, May 21. <https://illwill.com/on-destituent-power>