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Chronology, Narrative, and Founding Acts: Between a Transcendental Rock and a Decisionist Hard Place

Abstract

In attempting to represent political transformations, we often encounter a moment that seems to resist narrativisation, a moment of obstinate inconsistency which various theoretical, historical and fictional accounts cannot properly absorb except by way of indicating the parameters of a rupture. Here, I present a position which views these unrepresentable moments as structurally necessary features of revolutionary events. It is not simply that, at such historical junctures, we are faced with an abundance of information and that the unrepresentability or narrative deficit is the consequence of this surplus; on the contrary, the founding act that accompanies any radical transformation necessarily involves a certain temporal contraction. To the extent that narrative relies on a linear chronology, it fails to capture this moment of contraction. Indeed, this is why works of political philosophy associated with a founding contract (for example Hobbes's Leviathan and Rousseau's Social Contract) cannot fully suppress the moment of circularity in which the rhythm of chronological time skips a beat and, to paraphrase Rousseau, one requires an effect to perform the function associated with its own cause. If the moment of founding can be represented at all, it is only by way of paradox and metaphor.

By forging a collaboration between Laclau, Derrida and Arendt on the issues associated with political foundation and transformation, this paper seeks to provide a paradigm for understanding revolutionary action which avoids the twin pitfalls of decisionism and determinism. The argument on this point is as follows: Although revolutions are not miraculous (revolutions do not emanate from, or refer back to, a transcendental 'beyond') they necessarily appear as such. We can

therefore follow Laclau in his argument that the grounds for political foundations have a quasi-transcendental status. Viewing founding political acts as involving a quasi-transcendental gesture then provides a new way of understanding the heterogeneous, intermittent chronology associated with decisive moments in politics.

Keywords: Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, Hannah Arendt, temporality, the political, revolution, quasi-transcendental, decisionism, chronology, narrative

In forming historical or fictional accounts of political transformations, we often encounter a moment that seems to resist narrativisation, a moment of obstinate inconsistency which various theoretical, historical and fictional accounts cannot properly absorb, except by way of indicating the parameters of a rupture. Here, I present a position which views this unrepresentability as indicating a structurally necessary feature of revolutionary events. This will be based on a reading of Jacques Derrida, Hannah Arendt and Ernesto Laclau which focuses on the status of the decision in each of their works as well as exploring and extending the notion of the quasi-transcendental. Instead of arguing that at historical junctures, we are faced with an abundance of information and that the unrepresentability is the consequence of this surplus, I argue that a founding act necessarily presents itself as a temporal fold or moment of circularity. In using the term ‘fold,’ I do not intend to refer to the concept as it appears in Deleuzian thought; instead, the fold in time that accompanies a revolutionary moment is used to refer to two related phenomena. Firstly, it is the cross-contamination of cause and effect that can be detected in accounts of revolutionary change or of founding acts. As I will argue below, even when one attempts to provide a hypothetical account of a founding political act (in the style of the social contract tradition), it becomes impossible to account for the founding deed itself without including a moment of logical bootstrapping in one’s account, that is, without presupposing the existence of factors which can only logically emerge after the founding moment has taken place. Secondly, the term fold serves to designate the subjective experience of revolutionary time as qualitatively distinct from normal, historical time. In the argument that follows, my guiding contention will be that the temporal fold accompanying founding moments cannot be represented as a positive narrative element; its appearance marks a breach or paradox. To the extent that the intelligibility of the narrative form itself relies on a

rectilinear chronology, it fails to capture this moment of contraction![1] Conversely, if we were able to fully represent the moment of revolutionary transformation, the resulting chronological account would render the transformation as a product of the preceding order, as continuous with it, thereby dissolving its revolutionary status.

The paradigmatic case of a folded chronology can be found in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's classic political text – The Social Contract. In describing the possibility of a legitimate political origin based on authorisation, Rousseau states:

> *For a nascent people to be capable of appreciating sound maxims of politics and of following the fundamental rules of reason of State, the effect would have to become the cause, the social spirit which is to be the work of the institution would have to preside over the institution itself, and men would have to be prior to laws what they ought to become by means of them. (71)*

The problem identified by Rousseau is as follows: In order for a political entity to be thought of as legitimate, in order for it to have the right to compel obedience from its citizens, the entity in question must be authorised by the community. In authorising a sovereign entity, the proto-citizens renounce the natural liberty which characterised their pre-political life in exchange for new freedoms and the security of the collective. The key problem noted by Rousseau in the quotation above is that in order to imagine a political community which emerges out of a contract, one that is legitimate insofar as it is based on consent, one needs to presuppose a collection of individuals who think and behave like citizens. The 'social spirit' which is supposed to be the product of the contract must already exist in order for the original contracting moment to take place. Rousseau's solution was to posit a 'legislator' who stands above the process. The legislator would be capable of "changing human nature; of transforming each individual who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole into part of a larger whole from which that individual would as it were receive his life and being" (69). Introducing the figure of the legislator has important implications for Rousseau's argument. Authority no longer emerges exclusively from the people, but relies on the educative powers of a quasi-external figure. Rousseau's account fails by usual narrative standards because the appearance of the legislator cannot be definitely located. If the legislator exists prior to the contract, we are left wondering how he acquired his knowledge of law-making; however, if the

legislator appears only after the contract, he appears to be entirely superfluous. Clearly, for the legislator to enter after the contract has been agreed upon would be a nonsense, but since we are never told how the legislator acquires their expertise in state-building, we are left with a narrative of origins which requires revelation as its unacknowledged paradigm.

One can note a clear parallel between Rousseau and Derrida in the latter's remarks on the signing of the American Declaration of Independence:

> *The 'we' of the declaration speaks 'in the name of the people'. But this people does not yet exist. . . . If it gives birth to itself, as free and independent subject, as possible signer [of the Declaration], this can hold only in the act of the signature. The signature invents the signer. This signer can only authorize him- or herself to sign once he or she has come to the end, if one can say this, of his or her own signature, in a sort of fabulous retroactivity. ("Declarations of Independence" 10)*

The problem Derrida notes is that the conditions required for the event of signing to take place are only logically conceivable as an effect of the event. There is no pre-existing norm which could authorise the signers prior to the act of signing since it is only by virtue of their signature that they exist as a political entity. This forces us to view their signature as retroactively altering the status of the act of signing. Rousseau recognised one aspect of this retroactivity. Choosing to exit the state of nature and enter into a political community based on a social contract requires pre-political humans to recognise in advance the advantages political life will bring. Derrida intensifies this problematic, however, insofar as he notes the unauthorized status of the signers who only acquire the authority to sign once the act of signing is complete. The signers must sign on behalf of the future community they will comprise.[2] Whereas a Rousseauian natural man is only conceivable as an individual capable of signing contracts once this initial contract has been signed, for Derrida the signers lack the authority to sign since their authority comes about only after the signing has taken place. Both the Declaration of Independence and the Social Contract contain a moment which resists chronological exposition. As soon as one attempts a proper chronological ordering, one encounters a paradoxical moment in which effects must serve to bring about their own causes. This is what Derrida terms the moment's 'mystique' – the sense that no amount of knowledge will

allow for a proper ordering of the narrative elements, that these elements are inherently uninterpretable.

In both Rousseau and Derrida, the founding event contains a moment which resists chronological exposition.[3] As soon as one attempts to construct a complete chronological ordering one encounters a paradox. This is because, as Ricoeur argues in his Time and Narrative, every attempt to render past events as an intelligible narrative automatically supplies a logic of emplotment: "[The plot of a narrative] 'grasps together' and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematizing the intelligible signification attached to narrative taken as a whole" (x). This 'grasping together' automatically reduces the contingency of the events that are being narrated and subordinates the succession of events to certain logical connections.[4] For example, if event A serves as the condition of event B, A must occur before B. Moreover, one cannot then say that A both serves as the condition for, and is caused by, event B since this collapses the sequence proper to narrative time. As soon as one disobeys this logic of narrativity one ends up compromising the intelligibility of the narrative. For Ricoeur this indicates a transcultural mimetic link between time and narrative:

> *[B]etween the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience there exists a correlation that is not merely accidental but that presents a transcultural form of necessity. To put it another way, time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal experience. (52)*

An obstacle to successful narrativisation would be an event which was both required by the narrative and impossible within it. Such an event would entail a failure in the successive ordering proper to narrative and, indeed, it is precisely such failed ordering that we find in Rousseau and Derrida which the latter terms the moment's 'mystique' ("Force of Law" 35). There is a sense that no amount of additional knowledge will allow for a proper ordering of the narrative elements; these elements are folded in such a way that proves resistant to narrativisation. Moreover, this resistance does not only occur when thinking through real examples of political discontinuity (the Declaration of Independence, the French Revolution, and so on) but can also be detected in speculative

anthropological accounts (such as Rousseau's Social Contract) aiming to account for the foundation of politics or society.

The same logic applies to revolutionary moments.[5] Since a revolution involves a re-foundation, a momentary return to the state of openness which characterised the original instituting act, it must also, in some sense, authorise itself. As Derrida notes, the "origin of authority, the foundation or ground, the position of the law can't by definition rest on anything but themselves, they are themselves a violence without ground" ("Force of Law" 14). The guiding question for this section will be whether it is possible to delineate a notion of the decision which avoids pure decisionism, that is, decisionism as unimpeded sovereign will, or as Marder states apropos Schmittian decisionism, as "power in its actuality, an always already exteriorized expression of political existence" (131). The revolutionary act would thus, according to a decisionist logic, be purely self-grounded and coextensive with the will of the subject. The concept of the decision we arrive at via Derrida and Laclau is distinct from pure decisionism in several important ways. I will look at each thinker's theorisation of the decision in order to see if either can present a reconfiguration of the concept consistent with a radical democratic project.

In his essay "Force of Law: 'The Mystical Foundations of Authority'" Derrida conceives a revolutionary founding act in a way that allows him to successfully outflank the charge of decisionism.[6] Although the revolutionary actors must act in the absence of a legitimising normative framework (since it is precisely this framework that their activity aims to produce), the way in which they relate to their activity distinguishes revolutionary acts from a decisionist assertion of will.[7] As Derrida argues:

> *A 'successful' revolution, the 'successful foundation of a state' (in somewhat the same sense that one speaks of a 'felicitous performative speech act') will produce apres coup what it was already destined in advance to produce, namely, proper interpretive models to read in return, to give sense, necessity and above all legitimacy to the violence that has produced, among others, the interpretive model in question, that is, the discourse of its self-legitimation. ("Force of Law" 36)*

The phrase "discourse of self-legitimation" is crucial here. It is clear enough that for a revolutionary movement to be successful, it must draw impetus from a discourse that legitimises its activity. But

it is equally clear that such a discourse must also be produced by this very activity. This is a problem insofar as a legitimating discourse needs to be anchored in a ground or founding truth which goes beyond it. If a revolutionary gesture were transparently self-grounding there would be no way it could appear to be legitimate, not even to the revolutionary actors themselves, since the very logic of legitimation requires an immutable legitimating bedrock which is external to, and unaffected by, that upon which it confers legitimacy. A pure decisionism would involve a transparently self-grounding act. In contrast, if a revolutionary act can be considered self-grounding in a way that is opaque to the actors involved, this may allow us to conceptualise radical political transformations which do not encounter the problems of pure decisionism.

In contradistinction to a pure decisionism, I argue that Derrida formulates a notion of revolutionary action which involves a quasi-transcendental gesture where this 'quasi' serves to indicate, as Marchart argues, "that all transcendental conditions will always emerge out of particular empirico-historical conjunctures" (25). The quasi-transcendental operation thus consists in a misrecognition which casts one's own historically conditioned claim as a trans-historical postulate![8] This is evident in the following passage in which Derrida refers to the moment of a new political order's institution:

> *Here we 'touch' without touching this extraordinary paradox: the inaccessible transcendence of the law before which and prior to which 'man' stands fast only appears infinitely transcendent and thus theological to the extent that, so near to him, it depends only on him, on the performative act by which he institutes it: the law is transcendent, violent and non-violent, because it depends only on who is before it – and so prior to it, and who produces it, founds it, authorizes it in an absolute performative whose presence escapes him. The law is transcendent and theological, and so always to come, always promised, because it is immanent, finite and so already past. Every 'subject' is caught up in this aporetic structure in advance. ("Force of Law" 36)*

Although there are points at which Derrida seems to cast law as transcending human activity, the proper task is to emphasise Derrida's claim that law appears as transcendent to man precisely because it is "so near to him". Insofar as the very notion of legitimacy demands a distance between the particular act and the ground that legitimates it, the revolutionary act must perform a double manoeuvre that both launches a re-articulation of the concepts of freedom, justice and equality, as

well as positing a transcendental ground which serves to legitimise this re-articulation. Crucially, this posited ground, in order to perform its legitimating function, must be perceived as immutable by the revolutionaries themselves even while it originates from their own activity. We are thus able to introduce a minimal, but all important, distance between pure decisionism and the decision associated with a quasi-transcendental gesture. In the case of pure decisionism, the content of the decision is transparent to the decider. There is no standard against which the decision could be held except the will of this individual since it transparently originates with their own act. In contrast, a quasi-transcendental decision includes both a particular content that is decided upon and a new standard against which this content will be measured. But even though this new standard issues directly from the revolutionaries' activity, the experience of the production of the new standard is not recoverable after the event as a freely willed act. Attempting to retrospectively plot the revolutionary transformation as a consistent narrative arc therefore necessarily results in failure; instead of recapturing the decisive moment between the build-up and the aftermath, the moment at which things "really happened," we always encounter a moment of circularity (or unrepresentability) insofar as the evental change requires us to think in terms of the discontinuity implied by a fold or entanglement in which the result of the change serves as its precondition.

In his Emancipation(s), Laclau provides a comprehensive account of the logical problems pertaining to revolutionary re-foundations:

> *As we have seen, the condition of the radical chasm that the emancipatory logic requires is the irreducible otherness of the oppressive system which is rejected. But, in that case, there can be no single ground explaining both the order which is rejected and the order that emancipation inaugurates. The alternative is clear: either emancipation is radical and, in that case, it has to be its own ground and confine what it excludes to a radical otherness constituted by evil or irrationality; or there is a deeper ground which establishes the radical connections between both – in which case, emancipation cannot be considered as a truly radical foundation. (5)*

Let us briefly recapitulate the contours of this dilemma. On the one hand, Laclau is keen to preserve revolutionary founding moments as radical in the sense that they do not derive from, or share a common ground with, the previous political order. The alternative position would entail a reformist resignation with an acceptance of limited, piecemeal adjustments as the limit of our

political engagement. Nonetheless, it is no less problematic to assert dichotomic radicalism since, insofar as the rejected social order and the new revolutionary order do not share any common ground, they become equally contingent and it becomes impossible to assert the legitimacy of one over the other. The classical notion of revolutionary emancipation implies the liberation of some fundamental human essence, and yet asserting this essence as the legitimating principle of the new political order prevents us from viewing this order as a genuine break with the past. Laclau proposes the following solution to the dilemma:

> *Emancipation means at one and the same time radical foundation and radical exclusion; that is, it postulates, at the same time, both a ground of the social and its impossibility. It is necessary that an emancipated society is fully transparent to itself and at the same time that this transparency is constituted through its demarcation from essential opaqueness, with the result that this demarcating line cannot be thought from the side of transparency and that transparency itself becomes opaque. (Emancipation(s) 6)*

This opaqueness, I argue, corresponds in practice to the moment of foundation. In order for a political act to be considered as a radical emancipation, it is necessary for it to formulate itself as a re-foundation as opposed to acknowledging continuity with the previous regime. But the vital moment at which the newly founded political entity posits its own founding normative framework, distinct from that of the previous regime, cannot be perceived as part of the revolutionary work; instead, it persists in a negative sense, either surfacing as an aporia marking the void at the centre of the revolutionary passage, or as a chaotic hiatus in which the multitude of positively given events and factors obfuscates an originary dislocation.

Laclau finds an analogy to the moment of political origin in debates concerning the status of zero in relation to the order of number:

> *Everything turns around the role of the zero. The zero is, we are told, something radically heterogeneous with the order of number. The order of number, however, cannot constitute itself without reference to the zero. It is, in this sense, a supplement to the system which, nonetheless, is necessary for constituting it. (Rhetorical Foundations 84)*

Zero is required in order to ground the system of number. If it is possible to conceive of plurality, it must also be possible to conceive of a total subtraction, and yet after this subtraction we would be left with zero, a term which is not representable in terms of plurality but which is nonetheless logically required as soon as we begin to think number as a system. Without the term 'zero' we would have no expression for the absence of quantity and would be left in the absurd position of describing absence in terms of a tendency towards infinite scarcity. However, the price of this use of zero is the introduction of heterogeneity into the order of number:

> *With respect to the system, the zero is an undecidable tension between internality and externality – but an internality that does not exclude heterogeneity. The zero, in the second place, is 'innommable', unnameable; but at the same time it produces effects, it closes the system, even at the price of making it hopelessly heterogeneous. (Laclau, Rhetorical Foundations 84)*

Moreover, Laclau points out that 'zero,' despite naming the absence of number, must be represented as number, always appearing in the guise of a 'one' (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 67-68).

This feature of the analogy between the order of number and the founding act that constitutes a political order allows us to segue into a discussion concerning the issue of representability. Constituting the order of number depends on the inclusion of an element, the zero, which is heterogeneous with respect to number and therefore not representable within it. This leads Laclau to argue that for a given system of meaning to successfully found itself, a certain repression must accompany the moment of origin, leading to its unrepresentability: "Insofar as an act of institution has been successful, a 'forgetting of the origins' tends to occur: the system of possible alternatives tends to vanish and the traces of the original contingency to fade. In this way, the instituted tends to assume the form of mere objective presence" (New Reflections 34). As this quotation indicates, Laclau's point is that each founding moment includes a gesture of exclusion through which alternative historical trajectories are ruled out. While I am in agreement with Laclau, my argument here is that the hegemonic operation also involves a quasi-transcendental gesture since the very act by which the political order founds itself must be expelled from the revolutionary narrative. Or alternatively, the revolutionaries must transcendentalize (i.e., posit as transcendental instead of empirical) the ground which will then serve to legitimate their activity. It is this aspect of the

subject's revolutionary activity which leads Laclau to a definition of the subject as "the distance between the undecidable structure and the decision" (New Reflections 30). The act is hegemonic in the sense that it excludes possible alternatives, but it is quasi-transcendental in the sense that it obscures its own site of origin. If the hegemonic operation could be transparently fixed to the willed activity of the revolutionary subjects themselves, their political endeavours would be self-grounding in a decisionistic sense that would undermine any claim to legitimacy; only insofar as it is also quasi-transcendental are we able to preserve its radical status without slipping into a decisionistic position. To clarify this last point, both decisionistic and quasi-transcendental perspectives on the act recognise that it is self-grounding, however, while for decisionism the act grounds itself in a way that is transparent to the actor concerned, a quasi-transcendental act involves a gesture which is necessarily opaque.

We have mentioned two possible strategies for constructing representations of the moment of re-foundation. On the one hand we have a chronological-linear strategy which attempts to read the revolution as an event necessitated by a series of causes, as well as necessitating its own effects. This strategy suffers from the problem, outlined by Rousseau, that in order to arrive at the revolutionary moment, certain effects must precede their causes. On the other hand, we could read the pre-revolutionary situation synchronically, as a field of positively given objective facts which, taken together, constitute an unanswerable challenge to the existing regime. The problem here is that it still takes a subject to decide that a deadlock has been encountered and that a solution cannot be reached through normal institutional means. That these modes of representation remain durable despite their internal inconsistencies could be seen as a result of their mythical function. Laclau states, "The moment of myth's realization is consequently the moment of the subject's eclipse and its reabsorption by the structure – the moment at which the subject is reduced to a 'subject position'" (New Reflections 61). Given that it is the exclusive capacity of the political subject to mediate the gap between the old regime and the newly founded order, and moreover, given that this process of mediation involves a quasi-transcendental gesture which must itself disappear from view so that the new order can be constituted, the subject qua revolutionary agent must also be absent from the revolutionary narrative. The subject's misrecognition of the scope of its participation, the extent to which it necessarily views itself as caught up in the process as

opposed to providing impetus, is therefore an essential part of the constituting activity, or, to follow Laclau's terminology, a 'constitutive distortion'. Misrecognition is thus 'universal' in the sense that there is no vantage point from which one could observe the entire process, while closure "becomes the main form of misrecognition" (Laclau, Rhetorical Foundations 15).

We are now in a position to venture a further reflection concerning the moment in which a quasi-transcendental gesture is performed and its implications for our understanding of temporality. Since, as Ricoeur argued, our experience of time is only possible through narrative, the impossibility of narrativising founding moments in politics points to a heterogeneous temporality associated with political acts. When, in On Revolution, Hannah Arendt points to the 'legendary hiatus' between the demise of one political order and the instauration of another, she hits on the insight that the subject's experience of revolutionary moments is necessarily hiatal. The temporality of reform is homogeneous and stable; revolutionary time, on the other hand, contains discontinuities and shifts, moments of hiatus and moments of density. Arendt argues, "the beginning has, as it were, nothing whatsoever to hold on to; it is as though it came out of nowhere in either time or space" (On Revolution 206). Key here is the insight that consistent chronological exposition is impossible. Even when one attempts to 'unfold' the account, to peer beneath the distortion in order to identify the 'true' undistorted content, one only finds a void. Arendt's contribution is precisely to show how pre- and post-revolutionary situations cannot be stitched together since the very notion of beginning implies the introduction of a hard boundary (reminiscent of Laclau's 'dichotomic radicalism') between the ancien régime and the new political order. The problem with Arendt's conception of the beginning is that she oscillates between a notion of the beginning characterised by 'complete arbitrariness' and one that recognises the moment of foundation as both arising immanently from human action whilst nonetheless demanding to be respected as an absolute ground as opposed to being treated merely as a historical event (Arendt, On Revolution 206, 204). Thus Arendt comes close to the quasi-transcendental position under discussion here. In order to break the "vicious circle in which all beginning is inevitably caught," the act of foundation must carry the binding force of a transcendental imperative (Arendt, On Revolution 204). This is why the constitution inspires "undiscriminating and blind worship": it is both the empirically existing document whose stipulations are the target of "critical debunking" and

various amendments while also serving as a symbol for the act of beginning itself (Arendt, On Revolution 204).

Arendt elaborates her approach to the emergence of the new in her essay "What is Freedom?" in Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought. In this text she notes again the "odd in-between period which sometimes inserts itself into historical time" leading to "an interval in time" (9). Arendt goes on to add a comment that jars with her position in On Revolution: this interval, Arendt argues, is "altogether determined by things that are no longer and things that are not yet" (Between Past and Future 9). The 'interval' now serves as a kind of temporal spacing, the dwelling place of human consciousness, which is a kind of on-going interruption in time's linear succession and is characterized by Arendt as a "parallelogram of forces" (Between Past and Future 11). Human freedom is made possible by the subject's situation in relation to time. It is because the subject is not fully immersed in linear time, because she occupies a position "in-between," that she has a capacity to act freely in such a way that serves as the source of "all great and beautiful things" (Arendt, Between Past and Future 169). But the problem that surfaces in Arendt's essay involves the contradiction between an interval in time which is altogether determined and a human subject who, despite dwelling in this determined interval, is somehow capable of initiating, of acting freely. How can this apparent contradiction be dealt with? The most plausible solution for our purposes is one that stresses the discontinuity between the perspective of the subjects whose free activity produces a constitution and the perspective on an individual who is external to the process. The interval is both determined and free depending on the position one speaks from. As an 'acting and speaking being' man has the capacity to initiate, to produce newness, and yet as a sufferer of history he is also bound to view it as a process in which he is caught up. In The Human Condition Arendt provides support for an interpretation of her notion of freedom that includes a perspectival split: "the human capacity for freedom . . . by producing the web of human relationships, seems to entangle its producer to such an extent that he appears much more the victim and the sufferer that the author and doer of what he has done" (234).

The innovative conception of political temporality one draws from On Revolution and the essays in Arendt's Between Past and Future can be supplemented by a reading which emphasises the quasi-transcendental status of the founding moment of a political community. As I have sought to

argue above, for a revolutionary act of foundation to appear legitimate to the actors concerned, it must refer to a ground which is external to it. Laclau's 'constitutive distortion,' already mentioned above, provides a way of understanding the appearance of a founding act as both historically situated and absolutely binding. The constituting moment is thus one in which the revolutionaries experience this legitimating ground as emanating from an external, immutable source, that is to say, when they presuppose it as already existing. It is precisely insofar as a founding act must 'cover its tracks' by transcendentalizing its own ground that, from the perspective of the newly inaugurated order, the moment of origin appears discontinuous with normal historical time. The 'worship' of the constitution by the American founding fathers, noted by Arendt, is thus to be understood as a symbolic residue of this original, transcendentalizing gesture (Arendt, On Revolution 204).

If, as has been argued, we can successfully evade charges of decisionism both through logical and practical strategies by invoking the notion of a quasi-transcendental operation, are we not nonetheless left equally adrift with respect to an ultimate a priori ethical ground?] That is to say, even if the distinction I have made between decisionism (involving an omnipotent, autonomous subject) and a quasi-transcendental revolutionary act (involving a constitutive distortion) can hold based on the transparency of the former compared to the opaqueness of the latter, are not the grounds posited by revolutionary actors just as arbitrary as the self-grounding sovereign decision? And would this arbitrariness not undermine in advance the status of the decision with respect to the ethical? When presented with this challenge in a volume co-authored with Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek, Contingency, Hegemony, Universality, Laclau argues that normative frameworks are not in principle distinct from the empirical, but that they gain an ethical quality as a result of a 'radical investment' (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 82). A radical investment is arbitrary in the sense that it is not predetermined by the ontic attributes of the normative framework receiving the investment. From this position, Laclau argues, two important conclusions follow:

First, only that aspect of a decision which is not predetermined by an existing normative framework is, properly speaking, ethical. Second, any normative order is nothing but the sedimented form of an initial ethical event. This explains why I reject two polarly opposed approaches which tend to universalize the conditions of the decision. The first consists of the different variants of a

universalistic ethics which attempt to reintroduce some normative content in the ethical moment, and to subordinate the decision to such a content, however minimal it could be (Rawls, Habermas, etc.). The second is pure decisionism, the notion of a decision as an original fiat which, because it has no aprioristic limits, is conceived as having no limits at all. (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 82)

Laclau wishes to distinguish his position from Rawlsian or Habermasian minimally universalistic ethics and yet he is equally concerned with maintaining a distance between his own notion of radical ethical investment and pure decisionism. But the third position Laclau introduces in order to outflank this dichotomy suffers from its own problems. Laclau argues that when faced with a choice between aprioristic limits (universalistic ethics) and an absence of aprioristic limits (decisionism) the proper task is to formulate a non-aprioristic limit which necessarily applies to any radical ethical investment. These limits are then held to be simply the "sedimented practices constituting the framework of a normative society," or, put in other words, the norms, values, laws and so forth, which are already in place in a given situation (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 82). The problem here is that if we accept that a sedimented normative framework necessarily limits any radical investment, this prevents us from asserting the possibility of a radical break between two distinct political orders. Laclau himself notes this in his argument in favour of the possibility of absolute breaks between political orders. In order for the genesis of a new order to be viewed as a genuine emancipatory event, "there can be no single ground explaining both the order which is rejected and the order that emancipation inaugurates" (Laclau, Emancipation(s) 5). The sedimented practices which are not vulnerable to reactivation would provide a thread of continuity between the old rejected political order, and the new normative framework. Moreover, our acceptance of some non-aprioristic limits forces us to suspend questioning concerning the original radical investment by which a primordial normative framework first gained an ethical character. Instead, we are only left with a single linear continuum of partial changes, with each change limited by the sedimented practices of a previous order.

In making this claim regarding sedimented practices, Laclau is attempting to distinguish his position from decisionism, however, the position he ends up taking not only contradicts claims he makes elsewhere, but is unnecessary since, as I have sought to argue, the decisionist charge can be answered in a way that does not threaten the possibility of radical political change. I would like

to therefore risk the claim that there are no practices which are so thoroughly sedimented that they could not in principle be reactivated by a sufficiently radical reinvestment. This position can be tested against Laclau's comments on political communities' 'unshakable beliefs'. Laclau argues that a contingent decision that comes into conflict with unshakeable beliefs would not be effective (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 83). We can extrapolate here on Laclau's behalf and posit a distinction between unshakeable beliefs which cannot be challenged and other beliefs which can be challenged and, at least potentially, overturned. This leads Laclau to argue that although a political order can experience "deep dislocations [and] recompositions . . . it never disappears to the point of requiring a total act of refoundation" (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 82). If Laclau is to be supported here, it is nonetheless also vital to point out that the boundary between these kinds of beliefs cannot be seen in advance. From the perspective of a proto-revolutionary political subject, it would be impossible to distinguish between practices and beliefs which are unshakeably sedimented and which could be vulnerable to reactivation. So in this case, one could argue that even though deep dislocations are possible, the potential scope of these dislocations is given in advance while nonetheless remaining indeterminate from the perspective of political actors. This makes Laclau's position as stated in his Emancipation(s) less appealing for our purposes since it sets immutable limits on what can be achieved in a given political situation, albeit limits that cannot be detected in advance. This oscillation between a theory of radical (but non-decisionistic) rupture and an alternative emphasis on immutably sedimented practices is also found in a recent collection of essays published just after his death. In his The Rhetorical Foundations of Society, Laclau takes a more radical position with respect to the problem of origins: "something is originary insofar as it does not need to go outside itself in order to constitute what it is" (15). It would appear here that Laclau holds a truly originary act to be fully self-sufficient, and yet in the same volume Laclau argues, "We live in a world of sedimented social practices that limit the range of what is thinkable and decidable" (134). Laclau's inconsistency here is to be seen as symptomatic of a desire to theorise radical freedom by showing how humans are capable of abruptly transforming their socio-political relations whilst simultaneously evading the charge that such a freedom is indistinguishable from, and therefore essentially identical to, decisionism. My argument, which runs in the spirit of Laclau's project without fully endorsing his position, is that the distinction between radical freedom and decisionism can be sustained so long as we accept the vital caveat that this distinction is only

available from a subjectively engaged perspective. A political subject is free so long as they perceive themselves as bound to the consequences of their free act just as Rousseau's citizen can be "forced to be free" (Rousseau 53). The decisionist, in contrast, only obeys the ebb and flow of their own will. In the case of pure decisionism, there can be no commitment to the consequences of a decision since the only ground that can be appealed to is the arbitrary will of the subject. This subject could not have an experience of the ethical since this would imply an external standard by which decisions could be evaluated. Decisionism is ethically empty for precisely this reason. In contrast, a quasi-transcendental decision involves a radical investment which gives the weight of the ethical to a given normative system. The revolutionary subject whose act produces a new normative system, a system that then receives ethical density via a radical investment, is herself bound by the new normative standard she has instituted. If this new normative standard were not binding, or to be more precise, if the subject whose act produces the new normative framework no longer views this framework as ethically binding, we immediately slip into a decisionist position. It is thus the fundamental risk and promise of the political that one cannot be sure in advance that the constituting act will not eventually prove to be decisionistic. Moreover, any certainty on this score will only be available to the subject who is already engaged in the process; from an outsider's perspective a quasi-transcendental gesture may well be indistinguishable from 'pure decisionism'.

The thorny issue of subjective engagement has implications for our analysis of historical events. Consider, for example, the opposed ideologies of National Socialism and Soviet Communism. The distinction between a founding quasi-transcendental gesture and pure decisionism can allow us to illuminate one aspect of the asymmetry between these two political movements. National Socialism can be characterised as fundamentally decisionist in character insofar as the will of the leader serves as the fundamental principle of law and politics. Recall that the National Socialist use of Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution allowed the government a wide breadth of action by curtailing constitutional rights. Opponents to National Socialism could be eliminated with impunity, while responsibility for the realisation of the National Socialist ideology was the responsibility of the Führer. Crucially, between 1933 and 1945, there were few, if any, political dissidents who objected to Hitler's program as an incomplete realisation of National Socialism. Since the will of the leader was a principle tenet of National Socialism along with pan-Germanism and racial

purification, it is difficult to imagine Hitler being charged with a betrayal of the core principles of National Socialism. In contrast, throughout various communist countries, dissident movements constantly highlighted the disparity between the ideals of Communism and the imperfect realisation of these ideals in the practices of existing socialist governments. The asymmetry between National Socialism and communist ideology can be brought out when we consider what it means to take the ideology of each at face value, to interpret it as a serious program for social and political change. The citizen who takes National Socialism seriously is immediately corrupted since, aside from the abhorrent content of the ideology itself, the subject is entirely absolved of ethical responsibility (responsibility being concentrated in the figure of the leader). We observe this in the excuse voiced by those tried at Nuremberg who claimed they were simply "following orders" and thus could not be held responsible for their actions. It is entirely different for the citizen of a communist country who, so to speak, takes Communism seriously. To follow Žižek's reading,

> *resistance was an indication of the success of the ruling ideology. In their very resistance to the Communist regime, the people relied on the official ideology itself which often blatantly contradicted reality: actual freedom, social solidarity, true democracy. . . . One should never forget the extent to which the dissident resistance was indebted to the official ideology. (260)*

To return to the distinction between decisionism and quasi-transcendentalism, one can see how decisionist ideologies lead to the ethical vacuity of the political subjects who endorse them, while in contrast, quasi-transcendentalism leads to subjective ethical engagement. The communist subject labours in the service of ideals which are seen as exceeding her (i.e., posited as transcendental) while nonetheless emanating from her own activity. The communist values Žižek mentions (actual freedom, social solidarity, true democracy) become the standard against which the actions of the regime and the citizenry are held. This is why the communist governments could fail by their own standards, leading dissidents to call, for example, for 'Socialism with a human face,' whereas in contrast, it would be absurd to imagine accusations from within the Nazi Party criticizing Hitler for improperly adhering to the tenets of National Socialism and on that basis demanding 'Nazism with a human face'. One can thus see how the distinction between decisionism and quasi-transcendentalism is not a mere theoretical indulgence but has real implications at the level of empirical-historical analysis.

It is now possible to offer a few concluding remarks on the complex issue of radical, non-decisionistic moments of change. The insight that appears through a close reading of specific passages of the works of Derrida, Arendt and Laclau is that thinking through the possibility of radical political acts requires us to endorse a heterogeneous, non-linear temporality. A founding act, as distinct from a Schmittian decision, is experienced as a disturbance in narrative rather than an additional positive narrative element. By placing Laclau in dialogue with Ricoeur and others, we can see how the 'constitutive distortion' that accompanies a founding performance blocks the totalising imperative to view the past as cohering in a single seamless whole. It is a distortion which is necessary if the founding act is to have quasi-transcendental as opposed to decisionistic status. But insofar as the constitutive distortion is successful, that is to say, insofar as the founding act is transcendentalized and the revolutionary founders themselves perceive their act as emanating from, or grounded in, something which goes beyond them, the moment of founding itself must be suspended from view. Retrospectively, the founding act then appears only as a moment of circularity in which the causal nexus is momentarily derailed by an unconditioned decision made in a moment of undecidability.

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[1] As I will outline below with reference to Ricoeur's Time and Narrative.

[2] Bonnie Honig emphasises the way in which the rhetorical force of the declaration arises from its undecidability as a constative or performative statement. I accept Honig's approach but do not see it as incompatible with my own emphasis on the impossibility of a full chronological exposition of the act of signing (Honig 105).

[3] This is akin to what E. E. Berns refers to as the "constitutive lack of completeness . . . a fold, an empty place, a dislocation" (76). While I agree with this characterisation, I am more concerned with the temporal aspects of this dislocation as a fold in chronology or narrative.

[4] I use the term 'contingent' here to refer to outcomes that are not necessitated by prior conditions. That is not to say that contingency is the opposite of necessity, but rather, following Laclau, that contingency is an internal subversive moment within necessity, that which distorts or disturbs necessity and "hinders its full constitution" (Laclau, New Reflections 27).

[5] I consider revolutionary moments to be those historical points at which power is not concentrated in a single political entity (e.g., a king, a president, a general in the army) but is diffused throughout the population. At such moments there is a shift from constituted power (power concentrated in a particular political actor) to constitutive power (the inalienable power of the people reconstitutes their government). The distinction between constituted and constitutive power is drawn from Arendt's reading of Seiyes in On Revolution (163).

[6] The position I take on Derrida's concept of the decision only holds for the kind of decision implied in the works under consideration here. The understanding of the decision that features in "Force of Law" and "Declarations of Independence" does not lead to the conclusion arrived at by Camil Ungureanu for whom "Derrida and Schmitt can be confidently placed in the same category" (296).

[7] By 'legitimizing normative framework,' I simply refer to the idea that while governments are legitimated by a certain accepted discourse (e.g., contemporary Western governments are legitimated by periodic elections which are taken to be expressions of the will of the people), revolutionaries must act in the absence of such a discourse. Revolutionary activity must always at

first seem to be a wild, unauthorized outburst. This is why part of the revolutionary work is to produce a discourse which legitimizes the revolutionary upheaval such as the aspiration to self-government (e.g., the American Revolution) or the demand for freedom from economic hardship produced by inequality (e.g., the French Revolution).

[8] In this use of the term ‘quasi-transcendental’ I take my lead from Oliver Marchart who describes the two aspects indicated by the ‘quasi’: “one aspect which the 'quasi' indicates is that ground and abyss, conditions of possibility and impossibility, are inseparably interwoven, and the other aspect indicated by the 'quasi' is that all transcendental conditions will always emerge out of particular empirico-historical conjunctures” (25).



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