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The Politics of Prescription

The assassinations of Salvador Allende and Amílcar Cabral in 1973 mark the end of the last truly transformative sequence in world politics, the sequence of national liberation associated with the victories of Mao Tse-tung, Mohandas Gandhi, and Fidel Castro. It may be that this end is itself now coming to an end, through the clarification of what Mao might have called a new “principal contradiction”—the convergence, most obviously in Iraq and Haiti, of ever more draconian policies of neoliberal adjustment with newly aggressive forms of imperial intervention, in the face of newly resilient forms of resistance and critique.¹

Political philosophy is confronted today by only one consequential decision: either to anticipate this end of an end and develop its implications, or else to ignore or deny it and reflect on its deferral. The first option is the path of prescription and hope, of disruptive innovation and retrospective justification; the second is split between cautious reformism and postrevolutionary despair.

In its liberal-democratic guise, the reformist fork of this second path remains the dominant discourse of the day. It continues to believe that

the course of historical change remains broadly in line with forms of rational improvement, or at least that alignment with the general way of the world offers a reasonable chance of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect. The “ordinary language philosophizing” still popular among some Anglo-American thinkers, for instance, provides what one of its more versatile practitioners calls “a way of tapping the resources of the self in a way which will allow the philosopher to recall, explore, and display the nature, extent and security of her alignments with the world and with the human community.”² One way or another, variations on this theme of alignment and its cognates (communication, community, consensus, toleration, recognition, and so on) continue to inform much of the recent work of thinkers like Jürgen Habermas, William Connolly, Stanley Cavell, Charles Taylor, and Richard Rorty.

Many of their more inventive continental rivals, by contrast, have sought an elusive refuge from the world through strategies of deferral or withdrawal. Such is the general movement of the postrevolutionary alternative, a trajectory illustrated nowhere more dramatically than through the austere and ardent example of Guy Lardreau. Faced in the mid-1970s with frustration of the avowedly impossible demands of absolute revolt, with the reduction of a “cultural” to a merely “ideological” revolution, Lardreau has subsequently explored the compensations of a negative philosophy: “Negative philosophy is ineluctably worth more than any affirmation for, affirming nothing, it has no interest in betrayal, and it never lies.”³ Each in their own way, many of Lardreau’s contemporaries have charted a similar course. Contaminated by fascism, notions of decision and resolution were abandoned in favor of a generalized indecision. Contaminated by imperialism, the category of the universal was dissolved in favor of the fragmentary, the particular, or the contingent. The pursuit of clarity and distinction was eclipsed by a determination to bear witness to an apparently more fundamental obscurity or paralysis—thought confronted by situations in which it is impossible to react (Gilles Deleuze), demands that cannot be met (Emmanuel Levinas), needs that can never be reconciled (Jean-François Lyotard), promises that can never be kept (Jacques Derrida).

Nonetheless, there is nothing to stop us from anticipating a way out of this impasse. Prescription is first and foremost an anticipation of its subsequent power, a commitment to its consequences, a wager on its eventual strength. Against alignment with the way of the world, against withdrawal

from engagement with the world, it is time to reformulate a prescriptive practice of politics.



1. A *prescription* involves the *direct* and *divisive* application of a *universal principle* (or *axiom*). For instance: if we uphold the axiom of equality, we can prescribe the rejection of slavery, and with it the organization of a force capable of transforming the relations that sustain the plantation economy. If we uphold the axiom of the worker, we can prescribe the restriction of corporate power, that is, the organization of forces capable of reversing the subordination of politics to profit. If we uphold the axiom of territorial integrity, we can prescribe a relation of resistance to foreign aggression, and with it the mobilization of a force capable of repelling invasion.

After Joseph Jacotot, Jacques Rancière's approach to education offers an especially instructive example of this more general point. If we assume the axiom of equality, if "equality is not a goal to be attained but a point of departure, a supposition to be maintained in all circumstances," then we can prescribe an approach to learning that is indifferent to differences of knowledge, mastery, or authority. We can subtract the process of learning from the progress of explanation, the process of education from training or "preparation." We can isolate the process of learning from the cultivation of ability. We can teach things we know little or nothing about. We can grasp even the most difficult of ideas, since "the same intelligence is at work in all the productions of human art."⁴

Prescription is *direct* because its element is the urgency of the here and now. Prescription ignores deferral; it operates in a present illuminated through anticipation of its future. A prescriptive politics sidesteps the authorized mediation of public inquiries, sociological studies, or NGOs—the recent rise of charitable or "humanitarian" NGOs as privileged points of commentary and concern is itself one of the more striking signs of the ongoing depoliticization of contemporary conflicts.⁵

Prescription is *divisive* because its application divides adherents from opponents, but *universal* insofar as its assertion depends on a properly axiomatic principle. From Kant, the politics of prescription retains an indifference to difference, interest, consensus, adaptation, or welfare;⁶ against Kant, the prescribing of politics proceeds only in the element of partisan division, through engagement with strategic constraints that cannot be jus-

tified in terms of unconditional duty or respect for the law. Unlike Kantian morality, unlike any singular or immediate articulation of the individual and the universal, relational prescription operates in a version of the domain that Étienne Balibar (after Alexandre Kojève, Gilbert Simondon, Jacques Lacan, Pierre Bourdieu, et al.) calls the “transindividual.”⁷

Alain Badiou is the great contemporary thinker of axioms. In each case, what Badiou calls a “truth-procedure” proceeds as the assertion of an axiomatic principle, one subtracted from the mediation of existing forms of knowledge, recognition, or community. As a rule, “the real is only encountered under the axiomatic imperative.”⁸ An axiom neither defines nor refers to some entity external to itself. Instead, it posits a purely implied term and then stipulates the way that its implicit term can be manipulated, such that this manipulation exhausts all that can be said or deduced about this term.⁹ Badiou’s axiomatic orientation thereby suspends the supervision of language games, deflates the pathos of romanticism, interrupts the management of consensus or communication. In its axiomatic integrity, every

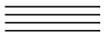
political decision tears itself away from any dialectic of the subjective and the objective. No, it is not a matter of leading to action a consciousness of what there is, of changing, through reflection and operation, necessity into liberty. There is no passage here from the in-itself to the for-itself. The beginning, under its eventual injunction, is pure declaration.¹⁰

In strategic terms, the importance of Badiou’s intervention in the field of contemporary philosophy is second to none. But a prescription is not reducible to an axiom, and what remains relatively underdeveloped in Badiou’s work is its properly prescriptive or relational aspect. An axiom is intransitive; it governs the terms (points, sets, citizens, and so on) it implies without exception. A prescription applies what an axiom implies, in the concrete medium of relational conflict. Consider, as a representative example, the axiom “Everyone who is here is from here”—a principle that often recurs in recent issues of *La Distance politique*. Versions of this principle continue to guide one of the few militant political projects in France today, the movement of the *sans papiers*. Such an axiom acquires a prescriptive force, however, only through the slow transformation of *here*, through a process that engages with the entrenched forms of discrimination (the division of labor, the distribution of resources, the location of housing, the access to education and to the media of expression in the public sphere, etc.) that serve

to isolate immigration as a political “problem.” Badiou has made no small contribution to many of these issues. For him it remains axiomatic, nonetheless, that every political sequence proceeds at a “pure” distance from the domain of the social, *subtracted* from the domain of social relationships and economic constraints. If political equality must be “precisely an axiom and not a goal,” if it must be “postulated rather than willed,” then Badiou concludes that “the effect of the egalitarian axiom is to undo relationships [*liens*] and to desocialize thought.”¹¹

A more prescriptive approach will acknowledge, instead, that only confrontation of these constraints and transformation of these relationships offers any lasting political purchase on a situation. The distance presumed by such confrontation remains a relational (or “impure”) distance. A version of the axiom of equality no doubt inspired the American mobilization for civil rights, just as it does contemporary struggles against racism and neocolonialism: the whole problem, clearly, is how to make an anti-racist prescription *consequential* in a situation that has long since accommodated itself to the explicit principle of equality. To uphold this prescription is to participate in the step-by-step transformation of what Nikhil Singh has recently described as the ramified “spatial apartheid” of a structurally racist socioeconomic order.¹² The axiom of equality is a fundamental point of departure, and it refers to no more primordial value (humanity, altruism, compassion, etc.), but it remains formal and nonrelational; a prescriptive political practice, by contrast, undertakes the concrete transformation of those relations that sustain inequality, exploitation, or oppression.

An axiom, we might say, is a principle we posit in such a way as to take it subsequently for granted. A pure point of departure, it is by some token “forgotten” in the prescriptive pursuit of its consequences. But if equality is always a postulate, justice remains an achievement: in each particular case, the presumption of equality will have been subsumed in the struggle against injustice.

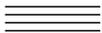


2. *Politics is the aspect of public or social life that falls under the consequences of a prescription.* Politics is not reducible to the art of the possible. Prescription is indifferent to calculations of the possible or the feasible, along with the “progressive” temporality associated with making-possible. Politics, then, is a condition that sometimes happens to the social. Not everything is political. Prescriptions are targeted and specific. The personal is not

political, and there is no “politics of the everyday” that does not, precisely, convert the latter into its opposite. Prescription converts hitherto inconsequential, multivalent, and multipolar relations into consequential (and thus bipolar) ones.

The thinker so often credited today with our most compelling concept of the political, Carl Schmitt, is in fact guilty of a disastrous and systematic confusion of the political and the social. Schmitt’s notorious distinction of friend from enemy is as much social as it political. The existential element of this distinction is “extreme peril” and war, and only the *political* sovereign can decide on war, at a distance from all “normative ties.”¹³ On the other hand, the normless intensity of “real combat with a real enemy” presumes and reinforces the *social* homogeneity of the combatants. The “political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly . . . but he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are always possible.”¹⁴ Schmitt’s fascistic glorification of violent struggle does nothing to mask his dependence on the specified identity of particular communities or ways of life. Even the state-political order that Schmitt nostalgically associates with the old *nomos* of the earth, the *jus publicum Europaeum* that allowed for the civilized containment of European interstate war from the mid-seventeenth to the late nineteenth centuries, is patently based on the extension, in global terms, of an aristocratic social order: conflict between dueling European states could remain within respectfully lawful limits so long as civilized Europe preserved an absolute barrier between itself and the territory of non-European barbarity, where no rules apply.

The problem with Schmitt’s concept of the political, in other words, is that it is not prescriptive *enough*. Politics divides, but not between friends and enemies (via the mediation of the state). Politics divides the adherents of a prescription against its opponents.



3. A prescriptive politics presumes a form of classical logic—the confrontation of two contrary positions, to the exclusion of any middle or third. The targeted transitivity of a prescription compels a response that can only take one of two forms: for or against. A prescriptive politics refuses any “third way.” When an issue becomes political, when it ceases to be a matter of merely social interest or cultural expression, it polarizes between yes or no. This

brutal simplification of the issue is characteristic of any political sequence. Prescriptive (as opposed to moral or pragmatic) positions against slavery or colonial domination, for example, must initially preserve what Frantz Fanon diagnosed as the “manichean” division of colonial society.¹⁵ Such was the guiding insight of the great anticolonial movements of the 1940s and 1950s, the presumption common to Gandhi, Cabral, C. L. R. James, Nelson Mandela, Aimé Césaire (and subsequently abandoned by most contributions to *postcolonial theory*)—that between colonizer and colonized there was no third term, no progress, development, or *évolution*, no “human contact,” but only what Césaire listed as “intimidation, oppression, the police, taxation, theft, rape, contempt, distrust.”¹⁶

If Marx remains the dominant point of reference for any prescriptive conception of politics, it’s not because he supposedly bound the fate of political prescription to a determinist science of history or economics but because he offers the most profound and instructive analysis of the essential dualism of political struggle. Against any nostalgic reference to the evasive complexity of early modern society (with its multiple and overlapping social classifications), Marx proposes a transformative conception of politics as a stark struggle between “two great hostile camps, two great classes directly facing each other.”¹⁷ Marx’s analysis of capitalist production allows for the isolation of a *single* operator of socioeconomic distinction, the process of exploitation that separates two and only two terms: exploited from exploiter, proletariat from bourgeoisie. This remains the most urgent and most valuable lesson of *The Communist Manifesto*, and it is the reason why its third and final section, titled “Socialist and Communist Literature,” retains a more than polemic force. In the crucible of prescriptive conflict, the complex social distinctions and mediations explored in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* (and revived by contemporary theorists of diversity and recognition) are subsumed along with all other forms of nonpolitical complexity, “all religious and political illusions.”¹⁸ As Lenin will insist when he comes to answer “One of the Fundamental Questions of the Revolution,” vacillation is itself “the most painful thing on earth,” and when the conditions for decisive action are right, then there can be “no middle course.”¹⁹

In the divisive present of a prescription, the political is always that aspect of public life that, in view of a specific simplification, falls for a certain time under the decisive logic of a “last” or final judgment. The refusal to recognize the implacable dualism of a prescription is itself an *orthodox* ideological reaction; an insistence on compromise, on negotiation, on piecemeal

“democratic” reform, has long been the privileged vehicle for the reproduction and reinforcement of the status quo.

One prescription, two positions; the logic of prescriptive antagonism evokes the old “union of contraries” if and only if this unity persists as the “effective gap” between two.²⁰ That “one divides into two” has never meant that a whole splits into halves; it means that the antagonistic relation of the two is itself one. To the one of domination corresponds the two of the dominant and dominated.



4. *Prescription is oriented by its anticipation of clarity and distinction.* A decision will have been right, a project will have held true: the temporality of prescription must initially be conjugated in that future anterior championed by Maximilien Robespierre and Fanon (along with Jean-Paul Sartre, Lacan, Badiou, et al.). Lacan’s early formulation remains one of his most illuminating: even in the ordinary intersubjective relation of speech, “I utter what was only in view of what will be. . . . What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was . . . but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming.”²¹ As Badiou reminds us, however, the “anticipatory certitude” that alone can guide any extraordinary “process of becoming” itself depends on the courage and confidence that a decisive intervention, in the element of present uncertainty, demands of its subject.²²

The temporality of anticipation (to say nothing of its joining with resolution) need not be abandoned to the Heideggerian tradition. In keeping with the rationalist tradition, a prescriptive politics accepts that since everything begins in obscurity and confusion, clarity, where it exists, will come to exist as the *result* of an assertive distinction. A prescription applied to an issue that is already clear is obviously either redundant or digressive. Though nothing could be simpler than a prescription, a prescription applies only in the element of dissensus and uncertainty. To prescribe is not to edify or instruct. A prescription emerges as a distillation of what will have been obvious.

The “obvious” principle of territorial sovereignty applies only in the prescription of an active and divisive resistance against occupation or assault—for instance, in Vietnam, Gaza, or Falluja (whereas the imperial position has always been “Abandon your resistance; accept the occupation as a preliminary condition of entering into negotiations for an attenuated form

of future occupation.” Likewise, the axiom of civic equality posited by the French Revolution was never less obvious or more consequential than when it guided, between 1791 and 1794, a prescriptive campaign against colonial slavery—a campaign that was itself shaped by the astonishing mobilization, in the face of united metropolitan opposition, of the slaves of Saint-Domingue. Despite his relatively slow response to this particular mobilization, Robespierre himself, of course, endures as one of the great proponents of anticipatory clarification. If the revolution requires the death of the monarch, to cite one of his more notorious speeches, this is not because Louis should be judged and deemed guilty of this or that offense but because, as will have become obvious, the revolution has *already taken place*, and those who would carry it forward will find its continuation incompatible with royalty.²³

A prescriptive practice always works on the edge of the unknown, without the authority or authorization of established knowledges. If Slavoj Žižek is right to say that Lenin is once again a decisive political reference today, it’s precisely because of his forceful insistence on the relative autonomy of strategic anticipation, of an intervention that only retrospectively allows for the full clarification of its conditions of possibility.²⁴ Prescription is always specific to a situation; its work of simplification always involves the careful investigation of particular configurations and opportunities: only after the abortive July uprising and the deflection of General Kornilov’s revolt does the Lenin of 1917 come to acquire a firm sense of the difference between the “mature” and the “immature.”²⁵ Against more cynical versions of materialism, the Lenin who reads Hegel’s *Logic* after the disaster of 1914 understands that the critical political relation is indeed *between* the real and the ideal, that “the idea of the transformation of the ideal into the real is *profound*.”²⁶ Around the same time, against Nikolai Bukharin and the dogmatic pursuit of direct proletarian revolution, Lenin will realize that the weakest link in the chains of exploitation is often to be found in literally marginal places—in the pursuit of national or anticolonial autonomy, for instance, as so many local contributions to a tendentially universal struggle against the highest stage of capitalism.²⁷

In his current work, Badiou usefully describes the decisive moments of subjective mobilization in terms of the critical “points” a militant body (party, organization, movement) encounters. You encounter a point of the situation when you are obliged to choose between the continuation of a prescription and preservation of the status quo.²⁸ A truth proceeds *point*

par point, where each point tests the development of subjective resources or “organs” capable of upholding the consequences of its commitment to transform a situation, the development of a subject’s capacity to “live for an Idea.”²⁹ Guided by an anticipation of the ideal, to prescribe is always to force the issue, in the absence of any guarantee. Prior to the imposition of its retrospective clarity, its eventual self-evidence, a prescriptive move will always appear as a step too far. Sartre explained this perfectly well: first you decide, then you justify the decision by providing it with defensible motives or reasons. First you commit, then you explore the limits of what this commitment allows you to do. The progressive-regressive method: first you act and then, in the new light of this action, you reconstruct the circumstances that led you to act.

This point calls for three immediate qualifications.

The first is that this retrospective justification of the decision is nevertheless an essential aspect of the process that validates a decision, that will allow its consequences to hold true. A decision is clearly no decision at all if its outcome can be deduced by criteria that preexist the taking of that decision; on the other hand, if a decision isn’t made right through the consequential development of these criteria, then it will turn out just as clearly to have been the wrong decision. A decision begins in uncertainty but only endures as decisive, precisely, if it *lasts*. Needless to say, there is nothing intrinsically progressive or emancipatory about the logic of prescription per se.

Second, though a decision anticipates its criteria, this anticipation does not itself *create* them ex nihilo. It is essential to avoid the trap that tempts both Sartre and Žižek: the logic whereby any genuinely decisive act is “authorised only by itself.”³⁰ Derrida wrestles with this same temptation in inverted form—the dissolution of decision through its passive exposure to an “im-possible” event, to a wholly secret and unrecognizable advent in a domain stripped of *all* anticipation or expectation.³¹ The obvious danger here was pointed out (and exaggerated) by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: if a decision proceeds purely ex nihilo, immediately, in the element of the void as such, then it risks remaining voluntarist and abrupt—that is, inconsequential.³²

Third: we must not forget that once they have become obvious, the implications of a prescription will be and will remain obvious! Those who dwell on the incalculable and the unrecognizable advent of an event would do well to remember this point.

5. *Prescription thus enables the relative autonomy of its effects, the strategic subtraction of cause from effect.* This is perhaps the most profound point of convergence between Deleuze, Rancière, and Badiou: an incorporeal effect is not reducible to its bodily cause; a political intervention exceeds its socialized place; a subjective formalization is carried but not mediated by its militant body. The whole point is that the relation between prescriptive mobilization and its historical conditions or “causes” will remain forever undecidable, pending the moment of prescription itself. There can be no question of reviving, even as the preliminary phase of a more complex mediation, a notion of thought and discourse as “the direct efflux of material behaviour.”³³ The most we can say is that while we never choose the circumstances in which we make our own history, some circumstances are more provocative than others.

This is not the place to go back over the vast literature concerning relative autonomy and “determination in the last instance.” But clearly we can cut short the recent farewells to the working class without simply returning to the messianic singularity of the proletariat. The pressures that tend toward global proletarianization neither dissolve into the cheery pluralism of new social movements nor converge into the unity of one Historical destiny: there is no eliding the conjunctural dimension of specific prescriptions. Suffice it to say that Louis Althusser’s great contribution to the renewal of political thought endures to this day, insofar as he broke once and for all with every reductive or mechanical conception of antagonism and in so doing opened the door to a more ramified but still unapologetically partisan analysis of complex social configurations “structured in dominance.”

Nevertheless, Althusser bequeathed his remarkable students the legacy of two problematic notions that none of them, arguably, have yet managed fully to resolve: on the one hand, the essential complexity (if not inertia) of a historical process without subject or goal; on the other hand, the essential simplicity (if not abstraction) of a politics in which “the masses make their own history.”³⁴ The effort to lend a non-evolutionary dynamism to the former led Balibar to develop an unwieldy theory of structural transition before turning to ever more equivocal, ever more “ambiguous” configurations of the political, divided between the competing claims of autonomy, heteronymy, and the heteronymy of heteronymy — this last a non-negation of the negation that promises little more, in the face of the supposed menace of ethnic ultraviolence, than the tired resources of citizenship and civility.³⁵

The effort to sustain a militant version of the latter led Badiou to stress an ever more ephemeral, ever more “vanishing” movement of the masses before committing himself to a void-based philosophy in which a strictly inaccessible inconsistency offers the sole foundation of any transformative truth.³⁶ And in a sense, the effort to invert both principles still guides the work of Althusser’s most emphatic student-turned-critic, Rancière, for whom politics subsists only in the transient and necessarily inconclusive suspension of domination, of the sanctioned distribution of functions and places. Rancière’s critique of Althusserian mastery leads him to embrace the antimastery at work in “the invention of that unpredictable subject which momentarily occupies the street, the invention of a movement born of nothing but democracy itself”—a movement that depends on nothing beyond its “constitutive fragility,” that “identifies and localises what has its being only in the gap of places and identities.”³⁷

Better than Althusser, Rancière understood that the “masses make history” only when, as in the particular circumstances theorized by Mao, the inventive military potential of the peasants and the proletariat is stronger than that deployed by foreign and feudal armies.³⁸ If today the end of the end of this advantage may define the horizon of politics, this end also commits us, more for strategic than for moral reasons, to the renewal of nonmilitary forms of struggle. Of the great anticolonial leaders it is perhaps Gandhi, rather than Mao, who has the most to teach our new anticolonial generation.

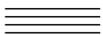


6. *Through anticipation, prescriptive intervention thus proceeds at a relative distance from socioeconomic causation.* There has long been no need for the renewal of warnings, routine since the Second International, against the symmetrical perils of economic determinism and reckless voluntarism. In the context marked by our post-Marxist (or anti-Althusserian) eclecticism, it is perhaps more important to resist the kind of “short-circuit” whereby—even in Balibar’s own recent work, for instance—the political and the economic dissolve into a single play of forces, such that relations of exploitation do not so much condition a political sequence as appear themselves as immediately political. It is a short step from here to the direct political investment of the social characteristic of a Deleuzian approach—a move that accounts for the obscurity of its political impact. In a recent interview in which he draws on Deleuze’s notion of affective connection and Charles Sanders Peirce’s notion of abductive participation, Brian Massumi

offers a suggestive account of how such a politics seeks merely to “navigate” movement, rather than direct or interrupt it. “It’s about being immersed in an experience that is already underway. It’s about being bodily attuned to opportunities in the movement, going with the flow. It’s more like surfing the situation, or tweaking it, than commanding or programming it.”³⁹

For Antonio Negri, likewise, the critical distinction has always been between a productive or constituent materialism (Machiavelli, Spinoza, Marx) as distinct from a merely critical idealism (Descartes, Hobbes, Rousseau, Hegel). The external vantage point claimed by the latter has supposedly been absorbed, along with everything else, through the completion of capitalist “real subsumption,” the absolutization of bio-power. Each in their own way, Negri, Derrida, Žižek, and Giorgio Agamben all accept this absolutization as the condition of an effectively *desperate* politics, a condition that solicits the equally absolute affirmation of an unmediated creativity (Negri), of a potentiality that subsists in the annulment of actuality (Agamben), of a decision withdrawn from activity (Derrida), of a radical act uncontaminated by reflection (Žižek).

A prescriptive politics, by contrast, busies itself with the invention of newly effective, newly *deliberate* ways of intervening in a situation. A consequential theory of prescription must conceive it as the process that allows for the relatively autonomous constitution of a militant subject, at a qualified distance from the social, economic, and psychological manipulation of affects and flows. A political subject prescribes its own boundaries. The prescriptive subject exists in its militant and emergent interface with the world rather than in any specified psychological (let alone cultural or biological) location. Prescriptive autonomy, in other words, necessarily presumes *some* kind of qualitative leap in the constitution of the subject, a leap adequate to enable its relative freedom from causal or presubjective determination. Without such freedom we cannot say that people make their own history; we can merely contemplate the forms of their constraint. And however radical or indignant such contemplation, by itself it will always fall short of the political as such—a point overlooked, in much of his work, by Pierre Bourdieu.⁴⁰



7. The “leap” of subjectivation is directed on the basis of a preliminary anticipation or “hunch.” Rather than invent its own criteria, an anticipation draws on the inheritance of previous prescriptions and learns from the forms of

resistance or opposition that it faces. Unlike Sartre and Žižek, Lenin himself conceives of his anticipatory intervention precisely as a sort of premonition that can withstand the test of clarity and distinction in their strictest sense, that is, the criteria formulated by a *science* of historical materialism. As everyone knows, Leninist intervention is not so much “authorized by itself” as it is informed by a sober discernment of the weakest link; Maoist intervention, likewise, is guided by the careful effort to distinguish the principal contradiction that governs a particular strategic conjuncture.⁴¹ (It is precisely the simplicity of this distinction, of course, along with its strategic effect, that begins to get lost with Althusser’s emphasis on the complexity of *overdetermination*, to say nothing of the sort of loose polydetermination privileged by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.)⁴²

Rather than subscribe to Žižek or Badiou’s claim that a radical act or imposition of a principle is what “induces” its subject effectively *ex nihilo*, then, we might do better to say that a prescription serves to *crystallize* hitherto inconsequential aspects of a subject in a newly consequential form.

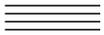


8. *A consequential prescription requires an effective foothold in the situation it transforms.*⁴³ Guided by its hunch or anticipation, prescriptive subjectivation is also dependent on the crystallization of historical conditions of *pertinence*. The axiom of territorial integrity is not pertinent in every political situation; it would be fatal, on the other hand, to assume that a supposedly global condition of postnational mobility has rendered it universally impertinent. As Edward Said knew all too well, to take only the most obvious example, it is no accident that the armored bulldozer remains the chief weapon of the Israeli occupation.⁴⁴

A prescription concerning immigration cannot proceed, today, on the basis of a utopian rejection of international borders (although it can and must concern the “reception” of immigrants here and now: the quasi-criminalization of refugees, the exploitation of immigrant workers in the domestic economy, the segregation of their communities, etc.). Prescriptions about working conditions will advance less in the abstract terms of a campaign against “capitalism” or “globalization” than through combative opposition to particular neoliberal policies or the elimination of precise forms of corporate power—for instance, through direct measures like those advanced by Via Campesina or Brazil’s Landless Workers Movement in their campaigns for food sovereignty, fair trade, and land redistribu-

tion. Again, the key to the decisive campaign against slavery, according to the most detailed study of the “Haitian revolution from below,” lay less in resolute leadership at the top than in the “self-sustained activities of the masses,” activities that proved powerful enough to transcend the various regional, occupational, and cultural tensions working against their long-term cooperation. These activities were themselves conditioned by structural changes to the plantation economy during its last decades of rapid commercial expansion, and these changes, together with the conjunctural impact of the revolution in France and new divisions within the slave-owning sector, lent the 1791 mobilization against slavery a strategic pertinence that François Mackandal’s rebellion, for instance, had lacked back in 1757.⁴⁵

Upheld as a strategic imperative, a prescription says *shall* rather than *ought*. Prescription is not a matter of abstract moral reflection, of aspecific obligation, of “objective” rights and wrongs: it is a matter, under the constraints of a given situation, of practical consequence and material invention, of relational struggle, of mobilization and countermobilization.⁴⁶



9. A prescriptive conception of politics presumes that its conditions of possibility are transcendental in the conventional sense—unconditional, transhistorical, indifferent to questions of context or pertinence. Conditions of pertinence must not be confused with conditions of possibility. Such confusion leads to claims that the subject is merely an effect—that the subject cannot act or that the subaltern cannot speak. It is essential, if we are to affirm the end of the end of politics, that we do not suture conditions of possibility to the actions they allow. We must depoliticize (and dehistoricize) the conditions of possibility of politics. The point is not that the human being is a political animal but that the human is capable of doing more than any sort of being. And this capacity includes a capacity for prescriptive politics that is itself irreducible to any biological “nature” or social (gregarious, communicative, altruistic, etc.) disposition.

It is no accident, notwithstanding dramatic differences in outlook and orientation, that the most forceful proponents of a prescriptive politics tend to ground its conditions of possibility in autonomous, “auto-poetic,” and extrapolitical faculties or capacities—Noam Chomsky in a mental-cognitive faculty, Gandhi in a spiritual faculty, Sartre in a faculty of imagination or negation, Rancière in a discursive capacity, Badiou in a capacity for unabash-

edly “immortal” truth. It is precisely the autonomy of such capacities that is at issue in the divergence, for instance, between Chomsky and his more conservative student Stephen Pinker, a divergence that is as much scientific as it is political. For Pinker our “language instinct” evolved more or less smoothly as an adaptive solution to the pressures imposed by natural selection; for Chomsky language comes to function at an essential distance from any coordination with nature, that is, at a distance from principles other than those of a critical autonomy itself. It is this distance that underlies our ability to *think* rather than simply *behave*.



10. *Prescription can proceed only in the imperative mode of a “logical revolt.”* In its indifference to community, compromise, or consensus, every prescriptive practice has an authoritarian or intransigent aspect. To avoid or dilute the moment of a “dictatorship of the prescription” is to evade the prescription itself. By definition, a prescriptive mobilization binds its adherents in a common dedication: a dedication that exceeds its deferral to authorized representatives, that is irreducible to the exercise of merely individual choice or to the reproduction of sociocultural norms.

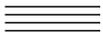
In today’s circumstances, a “democratic *politics*” designates first and foremost a contradiction in terms.⁴⁷ Democracy defines a particular administrative or procedural regime, not the dimension of politics itself. The imperial advocates of “political democracy” have themselves always recognized the true meaning of this phrase whenever it applies to situations polarized by significant conflict or resistance—from Guatemala (1954) and Vietnam (1956) to Haiti and Iraq (2004).⁴⁸ An election is a routine organized for the stable validation of an evolving status quo; an election that threatens to do otherwise is cancelled or postponed, pending the extermination of insurgents. The Algerian sequence that began with the annulment of an unacceptable vote in 1992 and ended with the electoral “stability” of April 2004—a sequence marked by some 100,000 deaths—will no doubt remain a model for the imminent democratization of the Middle East.



11. *Prescription is vigilant but not “observant.”* Prescription does not wait and see. Prescription is not inspection. By the same token, prescription is adamantly opposed to the ethical subsumption of politics, a “politics” based on the compassionate response to the spectacle of suffering, on respect for

the other and the consensual management of established human rights. In particular, prescription is in no sense a response to the pitiful visibility of others, and still less a response to their invisibility. In the absence of a prescription, what can be “seen” of politics is not political subjects but only victims and terrorists, the two sides of the same humanitarian coin. Imperial observers of recent events in Abidjan or Port-au-Prince have seen only anarchy and fear, not principle or resistance.

Since principles are invisible, there can no question of a “politics of recognition.” Equality isn’t something you can recognize or infer. If we prescribe the right of all inhabitants of a territory to a say in the government of that territory, then we will not require them to appear worthy of this right. They will not have to pass preliminary tests of citizenship and entitlement. Politics has no dress code. “Really existing citizenship,” however, remains profoundly marked by its conventional valorization of the noncitizen, and in particular, in our postcolonial era, of the descendants of those noncitizens par excellence: the natives, *les indigènes*. In the last couple of decades France, the country that once prescribed the universal bias of citizenship, has repatriated this “civic” distinction of *colon* and *indigène* from its original deployment in Algeria and Senegal as part of a long campaign to filter the remnants of republican universality through newly exclusive norms. To be a citizen of French Algeria, of course, was always to be the recipient of discriminatory protections and benefits, at the direct expense of indigenous noncitizens. To be a French citizen today is first and foremost to accept the discriminating embrace of the republican state, secured against threats both at home and abroad. Rather than postcolonial, the recent global extension of such a mind-set might be better described, to adapt Cécile Winter’s phrase, as simply “colonial without colonies,” *colonial sans colonies*.⁴⁹ After Ariel Sharon, after George W. Bush, Nicolas Sarkozy has learned this lesson well. The result is complicity in what Naomi Klein is right to call the ongoing Likudization of the world.⁵⁰



12. *Prescription is indifferent to the manipulations of passionate attachment.* Like any decisive commitment, politics is always affective. But even the most affective prescription can be sustained only at a critical distance from the “passionate” or “emotional.” Neither pity nor fear has any place in politics.

A prescription posits a positive (and divisive) principle as primary, whereas an emotional nonpolitics is based on a negative (and unifying)

prejudice or antiprinciple. The logic of consensual social or nonpolitical order, the logic of what Rancière calls *police* as opposed to politics, always relies on the manipulation of a paranoid *ochlos*—the “frightening rallying of frightened men.” Police consolidation promises security through a stable distribution of places and roles, through the fearful exclusion of threats and outsiders; the political *demos*, then, begins only with that divisive “movement whereby the multitude tears itself away from the weighty destiny which seeks to drag it into the corporeal form of the *ochlos*. . . . Democracy only exists in a society to the degree that the *demos* exists as the power to divide the *ochlos*.”⁵¹

In other words, a prescriptive politics must remember the critical lesson taught by the early Sartre, a lesson most starkly framed in his *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*: it is one thing to experience affects or feelings; it is quite another to participate in the “magical” manipulation of passions or emotions. It is one thing cautiously to acknowledge an opponent as dangerous or threatening; it is another to collaborate in the performance of fear or hate. Affects are rational responses to the reality they confront; emotions, by contrast, are theatrical routines we invent to justify a given alignment with the world. In each case, liberation from the emotional spell we cast upon ourselves “can only come from a purifying reflection or from the total disappearance of the emotional situation.”⁵²

Indifferent to the way we feel, indifferent to the way things look, a prescriptive politics avoids complacent reflection on our “modern social imaginary” for the same reason that it deflates premodern dreams of “turning the world upside down.” The renewal of a prescriptive politics will have required the refusal of both cynicism and distraction.

Notes

- 1 See in particular Gordon Lafer, “Neoliberalism by Other Means: The ‘War on Terror’ at Home and Abroad,” *New Political Science* 26.3 (September 2004): 323–46; Naomi Klein, “Baghdad Year Zero: Pillaging Iraq in Pursuit of a Neo-Con Utopia,” *Harper’s Magazine* 309 (September 2004): 43–53; Peter Hallward, “Option Zero in Haiti,” *New Left Review* 27 (May 2004): 23–47; Stan Goff, “The Haitian Intifada,” *FromTheWilderness*, January 10, 2005, available online at: www.fromthewilderness.com/free/ww3/011005_haitian_intifada_pt2.shtml. Accessed January 11, 2005.
- 2 Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy’s Recounting of the Ordinary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 19.
- 3 Guy Lardreau, *L’Exercice différé de la philosophie: À l’occasion de Deleuze* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1999), 88.

- 4 Jacques Rancière, *Le Maître ignorant* (Paris: Fayard, 1987), 229, 33.
- 5 As Arundhati Roy notes, “The greater the devastation caused by neo-liberalism, the greater the outbreak of NGOs.” See Arundhati Roy, “Public Power in the Age of Empire,” *Socialist Worker*, October 2004 (European Social Forum Special Issue), available online at www.socialistworker.co.uk/article.php4?article_id=2910. Accessed February 15, 2005.
- 6 Practical reason involves “a respect for something entirely different from life, something in comparison and contrast with which life with all its agreeableness has no worth at all” (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, ed. Mary McGregor [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 88).
- 7 Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1995), 30–32, 121; cf. Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, trans. Daniel Hahn (London: Verso, 2002), 27.
- 8 Alain Badiou, *Court Traité d'ontologie transitoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 135.
- 9 For a more detailed discussion of this point see Hallward, “Depending on Inconsistency,” *Polygraph* 17 (Spring 2005): 7–21.
- 10 Badiou, “Sur le livre de Françoise Proust, *Le Ton de l'histoire*,” *Les Temps modernes* 565/566 (1993): 239.
- 11 Badiou, *Abrégé de métapolitique* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 126; Badiou, *Infinite Thought* (London: Continuum, 2003), 77–78.
- 12 Nikhil Singh, *Black Is a Country* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 221.
- 13 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 12.
- 14 Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 48, 26–27.
- 15 Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris: Folio, 1991), 81.
- 16 Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1955), 19.
- 17 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Woodbridge: Merlin Press, 1998), 2.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 19 Vladimir Lenin, *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917* (London: Verso, 2002), 110, 121.
- 20 Badiou, *Théorie du sujet* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 42; cf. Pierre Macherey, “Un se divise en deux,” *Histoires de dinosaure* (Paris: PUF, 1999), 69–73. What remains at stake in such division is a central concern in the ongoing work of Bruno Bosteels and Alberto Toscano.
- 21 Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 86; cf. Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject,” in *ibid.*, 306.
- 22 As Badiou explains in his critique of Lacan’s “Logical Time,” a courageous “haste, not inferable from the symbolic, is the mode in which the subject exceeds [the symbolic] by exposing himself to the real” (Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, 272). For an illuminating discussion of this point, one that links Badiou’s conception of courage with the Kantian notion of “enthusiasm,” see Dominiek Hoens and Ed Pluth, “What If the Other Is Stupid? Badiou and Lacan on ‘Logical Time,’” in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward (London: Continuum, 2004), 182–90.

- 23 Maximilien Robespierre, "Sur le procès du roi: 13 December 1792," in Robespierre, *Pour le bonheur et pour la liberté: Discours*, ed. Yannick Bosc, Florence Gauthier, and Sophie Wahnich (Paris: La Fabrique, 2000), 193–94.
- 24 Žižek, "Between the Two Revolutions," in Lenin, *Revolution at the Gates*, 3–6. In a moment of crisis it is "sheer idiocy, or sheer treachery," Lenin knows, to postpone action pending the explicit approval of sanctioned authority (Lenin, "The Crisis Has Matured," in *Revolution at the Gates*, 139).
- 25 See in particular Lenin, "Letter to Comrades," in *Revolution at the Gates*, 157.
- 26 Lenin, "Annotations on Book I (Being) of Hegel's *Science of Logic*," in Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 38, available online at www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/cons-logic/cho1.htm#LCW38_114. Accessed February 15, 2005.
- 27 See Lenin, *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination* (1914), chapter 10.
- 28 Points indicate moments in which subjects "confront the global situation with singular choices, with decisions that involve the 'yes' and the 'no.'" In the example that Badiou develops in the first section of *Logiques des mondes*, the mobilization of Spartacus against Roman slavery, these punctual decisions include answers to the questions: "Is it really necessary to march south, or to attack Rome? To confront the legions, or evade them? To invent a new discipline, or to imitate regular armies? These oppositions, and their treatment, measure the efficacy of the slaves gathered together as a fighting body, and ultimately they unfold the subjective formalism that this body is capable of bearing. In this sense, a subject exists, as the localization of a truth, *insofar as it affirms that it holds a certain number of points*. That is why the treatment of points is the becoming-true of the subject, at the same time as it is the filter of the aptitudes of bodies." (I quote from the draft manuscript of *Logiques des mondes*, forthcoming 2006; the translation is by Alberto Toscano.)
- 29 Badiou, *Logiques des mondes*, statement 63.
- 30 Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 380; cf. Žižek, "Between the Two Revolutions," in Lenin, *Revolution at the Gates*, 8; Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 173.
- 31 See, for instance, Jacques Derrida, *Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 77; *Voyous: Deux essais sur la raison* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 198, 203.
- 32 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Joseph Bien (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 98–99.
- 33 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, part 1A, sec. 4, available online at www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/cho1a.htm. Accessed February 15, 2005.
- 34 See Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 20–22; *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. Grahame Locke (London: NLB, 1976), 46–47.
- 35 See in particular Balibar, "Three Concepts of Politics," in *Politics and the Other Scene* (2002), 23–35.
- 36 See in particular Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, 81–82, 190; Hallward, "Depending on Inconsistency," 14–15.
- 37 Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1995), 61; *The Names of History*, trans. Hassan Melehy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 98.
- 38 Rancière, *La Leçon d'Althusser* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 39–41.

- 39 Brian Massumi, "Navigating Movements," *21C Magazine* 2 [2003], available online at www.21cmagazine.com/issue2/massumi.html. Accessed February 15, 2005.
- 40 Cf. Bruno Latour, "La Gauche a-t-elle besoin de Bourdieu?" *Libération*, September 15, 1998; Rancière, *Le Philosophe et ses pauvres* (Paris: Fayard, 1983), 266–71.
- 41 Mao Tse-Tung, "On Contradiction," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 331–36.
- 42 These are among the questions that have been discussed in detail during sessions of the Althusser reading group organized by Ozren Pupovac, Alberto Toscano, and Nina Power (London, 2004–5); see also Bruno Bosteels, "Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject: The Re-Commencement of Dialectical Materialism," *Pli (Warwick Journal of Philosophy)* 12 (2002): 200–229.
- 43 In Badiou's jargon, this foothold corresponds to the "evental site" that shapes the foundation of a situation.
- 44 Cf. Edward Said, "Epilogue," in *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination, 1969–1994* (London: Vintage, 1995), 416; *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 244.
- 45 Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 228, 241–47.
- 46 To associate the term *prescription* here with forms of militant, divisive, but universalizable anticipation is to distance it, of course, from many of the connotations usually associated with prescriptivist approaches to moral philosophy—for instance, from A. J. Ayer's emotivism, or from R. M. Hare's emphasis on the prudent, consensual, and ultimately utilitarian management of preferences. By definition, a politics of prescription can conform to no abstract "golden rule" (see in particular Hare, *Freedom and Reason* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963]).
- 47 Cf. Badiou, "Democratic Materialism and the Materialist Dialectic," *Radical Philosophy* 130 (March 2005).
- 48 Cf. Seumas Milne, "If the U.S. Can't Fix It, It's the Wrong Kind of Democracy," *The Guardian*, November 18, 2004. For a particularly instructive example of this more general trend, see Greg Grandin's book on Guatemala after Arbenz, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
- 49 Cécile Winter, "Quelques Remarques après quatre années de travail du Collectif Politique Sida en Afrique" (unpublished ms., September 2004).
- 50 Naomi Klein, "The Likudization of the World," *Globe and Mail*, September 9, 2004, p. A25.
- 51 Rancière, *Shores of Politics*, 32.
- 52 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 53. In his important new book on the ideological history of fear, Corey Robin makes a broadly similar point: whereas premodern thinkers from Plato through to Hobbes evoke fear only as a rational aversion to dangers that might threaten positive political principles, the distinctively modern approach to fear configures it as a manipulable reaction to an apolitical if not purely phantasmatic evil, a reaction based on a supposedly self-evident emotional experience (Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004]).