



Towards a Political Anthropology of New Institutional Forms

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abstract

Exploring the connections between experience, movement and the creation of new political forms requires a fundamental anthropological investigation into the seeming human need for institutions. While the early twentieth century ‘philosophical anthropology’ developed by figures like Arnold Gehlen and Günther Anders provides some initial clues in this regard, recent debates concerning the organization of networked political forms require a rethinking of the negative vision of technics articulated by the conservative philosophical consciousness. Thinking the seeming limitlessness of experience in relation to the seeming need for determination in politics, the text asks how experience can function as a generative principle in the creation of new institutional forms immanent to the dynamics of social-technical networks.

What is the link between experience, movement and the creation of new political forms? We ask this question with both a sense of exhaustion and expectation, boredom and urgency. As Nietzsche taught us so magisterially in ‘The Uses and Abuses of History for Life’, amnesia is no less dangerous than nostalgia. It is always propitious to be suspicious of the new. Yet perhaps now, more than at the time of this particular philosopher’s senescence, there is also reason to be suspicious of the old. With this term, we refer above all to the political forms of modernity: primarily the institutional architecture of the nation-state and its subsidiary forms – the parliament, the army, the university, and so on – but also the trade union, the party, and the firm (in its extraterritorial as well as local manifestations). To be certain, there is a ploy in describing modern institutions as old. Let’s face it. Some of the postnationalist rhetoric of the 1990s was as inflated as the dot.com bubble.¹ And, while no one was naïve enough to claim that entities like the Union of Myanmar or the Belgium Federal Parliament would suddenly disappear, we now have more detailed accounts of the ways in which neoliberalism invests itself in specific regulatory environments and how the capabilities of nation-states can enhance global processes.²

1 We have in mind texts such as Appadurai (1996) and Hardt and Negri (2000).

2 See, for instance, Wang (2003), Harvey (2006) or Sassen (2006).

In a certain sense, however, we feel closer to the earlier postnational articulations than these later sociological descriptions. This is because the question for us is not whether modern institutions still exist or even whether they should exist. The answer to the former is surely incontrovertible, while the second begs the convenience of the high moral ground. What interests us are rather the possibilities for the creation of new political forms and the ways in which such possibilities are enhanced or restricted by the existing institutional architectures. For some time now it has been clear that novel forms of organization have begun to challenge the top down, vertical-horizontal, representative institutions of modernity and their rights-based notions of political life. In response, the existing institutions have attempted to ward off these new organizational practices or to absorb and imitate them, often under the mantle of policy directives encouraging 'innovation', 'creativity', and the like. In reality, however, the existing institutions have tended merely to adapt to prevailing global circumstances, rather than to actively innovate in ways that seek to intervene upon or change these conditions. It is time to ask whether new organizational practices, which have largely evolved around fragile practices of techno-social networking, might be given some more sustainable institutional form. The question is at once dangerous and crucial: dangerous because such institutionalization seems to threaten routinization and the closure of possibilities, crucial because networked modes of organization, despite the potentialities they harbour for new forms of political relation and expression, have as yet been inadequate to address the key contingencies, needs, and uncertainties that define contemporary labour and life.

Why then pose the question of political form on the cusp of experience and movement? In doing this we certainly don't hope to provide some kind of twelve step program or how-to. These terms signal instead a different sense or register of politics, equally remote from the social contract and political theology, identity politics and micropolitics, activist conviction or libertarian dropping out. In this sense our proposal invites attack or dismissal from across the ideological spectrum of constituted politics. That is easy. Refusing to address the variegated conditions of many and desiring instead a retreat into the harbour of false security, such critique gets us nowhere other than reproducing the *ressentiment* so cogently demolished by Nietzsche. Invention, we maintain, is a resource to mine as it subsists within the realm of experience. Movement individuates form – which can be understood as the contours, properties and communication of an organizing capacity – from the distribution of experience. As forces in tension, it is this doubling of movement – individuation coupled with distribution – that comprises 'the political' that attends the invention of new institutional forms. How to negotiate such tensions is a question of governance, and below we outline some general principles of how this pertains to networks.

The notion of experience calls our attention to immanent modes of sociality whose significance derives not from representation or interpretation but from phenomenal life itself. As opposed to experiment, which takes place under controlled conditions and seeks to create verifiable incremental knowledge, experience is always contingent. Whether accumulated or fleeting, remembered or immediate, coherent or jumbled, experience materializes in, or, perhaps more accurately, creates specific forms of life. We could say that, through experience, ontology reveals itself phenomenologically – a situation which means that sensation, affect, and aesthetics acquire an important role in

political life.³ Yet, despite this creative and relational impulse, experience does not supply firm grounds of evidence or authority. As Joan Scott writes, what “counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political” (1991: 797). To comprehend such politics is to begin to ask hard questions not only about how the seeming expansiveness of experience relates to limits and closure but also about how this tension conditions the possibilities for the emergence of new institutional forms.

Movement, unlike experience, is a term with immediate political resonance insofar as it describes nongovernmental forms of organization often associated with activist networks and their complex practices of horizontal connection and multiscalar engagement: new social movements, the movement of movements, global civil society, and so on. These modes of organization are certainly relevant to our investigation. Indeed, they provide some of its most fertile grounds. Already there exist many groups that embody and conduct research into these organizational modes, exploring the potentialities of practices such as swarming, the role of information technologies, or the possibilities for occupying and exploiting the institutional gaps created by the construction of multilevel political systems (for instance, in the contexts of the EU constitutional debates, educational reforms associated with the Bologna Process and the new discursive legitimacy obtained by civil society organizations participating in the UN’s World Summit on the Information Society). But it is not only and not primarily this sort of movement that we want to discuss. We are interested in the experience of movement as such – that is, movement in the kinetic sense. The tendency to attribute political status to the activities of social movements but to understand actual physical movement as apolitical is one that has received criticism from those who understand the mobility of migrants, particularly undocumented migrants, to pose a challenge to modern forms of political organization. As one of us explains in an article co-written with Angela Mitropoulos:

In the case of struggles surrounding undocumented migration, the very notion of movement fractures along a biopolitical or racialised axis: between movement understood in a political register (as political actors and/or forces more or less representable) and movement undertaken in a kinetic sense (as a passage between points on the globe or from one point to an unknown or unreachable destination). To keep these two senses of movement separate not only denies political meaning to the passages of migration but, also, fails to think through the complexities of political movement as such, not simply as the incompleteness and risk of every politics but, more crucially, as the necessarily kinetic aspects of political movements that might be something more, or indeed other, than representational. (Mitropoulos and Neilson, 2006a)

Without fully rehearsing this argument, we can say that movement, understood as kinesis, involves not only mobility in space but also in time (it is at once temporalized and temporalizing). In other words, movement unfolds in the relation between potential and act. Whether this relation is conceived as one of negativity or convergence, it implies a complication of the ends-driven ethos of action, which has always been held to constitute the political in the traditional sense (Neilson, 2004). Consequently, the kinesis of movement calls into question many of the shibboleths of modern politics, including the need for a sovereign body that can exercise the power of decision, identify

3 On the role of sense and affect in the contemporary expression of political power see Neilson (2005).

an enemy, and organize itself by means of an autolegitimating constitution. In such movement, the moment of self-valorization or self-representation is subtracted or given over to a dynamism or interminable negotiation of difference that eludes the mirage of a *telos* or an end. This is why one way of describing the new institutional forms that might emerge in and through the experience of movement is to say that they involve 'organization without ends' or 'organizing the unorganizable'.⁴ Such formulations are more than elegant paradoxes or easy invocations of social complexity. They signal the real challenges faced by political creativity in an institutional environment still dominated by the market and state.

Experience and movement then do not denote purely categorical or self-motivating ways of being: the experience of experience or movement for the sake of movement. It would be wrong to understand them either as unrestrained potentialities or foundational blocks for an alternative politics. They are always implicated in practices of control and, thus, remain limited. But it is precisely with respect to these constraints or, more accurately, the borders imposed upon politics by modernity, that new institutional forms might be grasped in their incipency. We are not interested in crossing borders simply to get to the other side. For it may be that the capabilities fashioned in the modern institutional environment can be recast, and perhaps radically so, within a new organizing logic. It is the moment of border crossing itself, with all its risk and untimeliness, which draws the immanence of experience and the indefiniteness of movement into an unstable and creative relation. There are also some practical considerations to take into account here. When economic resources are scarce, networks that wish to undertake a scalar transformation are compelled to draw on that which is available, however fragile that may be. It is in this sense that we understand the strategic (non- or counter-sovereign) decision to organize by drawing on the generic capacities of post-Fordist life: experience and movement.

At stake here is not only the question of the inheritance of modern politics, whether posed as the responsibility to choose one's heritage or understood as that which, through our struggles, chooses us.⁵ To derive new ways of being political we must be prepared to travel to the very edge of politics. Only at this limit might we question both the modern tendency to reduce the political to technics and administration and the opposite but equally modern propensity to imagine politics only as spontaneous transgression. If the challenge is to give sustainable constitution to networked forms of multiplicity without destroying their constitutive fragility and flexibility, there is a need to ask difficult questions about the partiality of politics, the potentialities inherent in technical practices, and the apparent human need for institutions – not just modern institutions but all institutions. This is a mode of investigation that draws us immediately to anthropological issues.

4 The references are to Virtanen, A. (2005) and to Florian Schneider's 2004 documentary film, *Organizing the Unorganizable*.

5 On these (opposed) positions on political heritage see Derrida and Roudinesco (2004) and Gabri's (2004) interview with Brian Holmes.

Institutions and Security

Institutions are always related to the question of security. Let us be clear. We are not speaking of this or that institution, say, the family, the university, the Duma, or the Enron Corporation. Nor do we wish to analyse the sociological processes, complete or incomplete, of institutionalisation, which have always been a source of anxiety for those who seek to embody alternative political lives. Rather, we wish to consider the way in which institutions habitualize and stabilize patterns of thought, feeling, judgement and action. The word institution, in this sense, describes a pattern of human relation. It sits alongside other words such as community, network, or movement. But, unlike these words, it implies a degree of rigidity or predictability: one that, in the modern context, is all too quickly associated with the operations of hierarchy, bureaucracy, or the Weberian concept of rationalization. What we want to explore is something more fundamental and anthropological – not simply institutions as they establish themselves under conditions of modernity, neoliberalism, or whatever, but institutional form as such. And this, we suggest, involves an engagement with the question of security in its properly political sense.⁶

Our motives for this investigation are twofold. First, they derive from an uneasiness with some of the more reactive discourses against the current neoconservative rhetoric of security. Without doubt, there is a real urgency to deconstruct and criticize the securitization of political discourse that is promoted across the formal political spectrum today. But there also exist situations where issues of security need to be addressed, politically developed and articulated. This is already occurring in the discussions concerning precarity and precariousness, which seek to address the issue of security in ways that go well beyond the issue of job tenure to encompass matters of housing, debt, affective relations, and even the vulnerable ontological condition of the human animal itself (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005). Indeed, it is in the context of the current precarity movements that some of the most interesting efforts to create new institutional forms have taken shape.⁷ There is, however, a tendency among some actors in these contexts to appeal to the state to address (and resolve) their precarious lives and working conditions. This can reinforce expectations that the modern state can and should intervene to provide stability (through policy initiatives that seek to shore up the current uncertainties of labour and life against some Fordist or Keynesian norm). Such expectations could even bolster the dominant ‘terror’-reactive (and ‘terror’-perpetuating) security rhetoric, which certainly promotes the fiction that the state adds stability and continuity to contemporary lives, if not carefully articulated with respect to issues of war and global conflict. There is thus a need to separate the question of security from the modern institutional environment or, at least, from the notion that this environment is the only or most effective one in which to address issues of precariousness and instability.

6 Our comments here are guided by the remarks on institutions by Sandro Mezzadra in Bojadžijev and Saint-Saëns (2006).

7 We are thinking of the radical investigations carried out by groups such as *Precarias a la deriva*, <http://sindominio.net/karakola/precarias.htm>, visited 10 October 2006, or the precarity webring, <http://www.precarity-map.net/>, visited 10 October 2006.

This leads to our second reason for raising the question of institutional form. What concern us are the diminishing opportunities for political expression within institutional settings where power intervenes to control the potentiality of thought. The situation we face is one that can no longer be fully analysed using concepts like hegemony or governmentality. We are in the midst of a general anthropological transition where the species-being of human beings, which is without any function and always open to change, is appropriated and subordinated to the specific tasks and aims of a particular historical period. What is at stake is not an attempt to censor individuals or deprive them of a voice, but rather the establishment of power over minds and the collaboration of minds. Power, in this context, operates through moods and sentiments, through the creation of shared beliefs and common opinions. Its point of application is no longer simply the body and the biological processes of life. It operates not on the level of acts or products but rather on the level of possibilities. And thus it cannot be questioned or opposed through a politics focused on outcomes or ends. If, under these circumstances, we seek to create new ways of being political, it is in the struggle for the direction of this transition (Virtanen and Vähämäki, 2005). And this means intervening in the present, searching for new institutional forms, and constructing alternative networks of political association. Moreover, it means addressing the all too often sidelined problematic of governance within transdisciplinary networks (Rossiter, 2006).

Perhaps then it is no accident that we turn to the work of two thinkers who wrote in a time and place where the operation of power over thought was pronounced (if of an altogether different quality and register to that we confront today). Both Arnold Gehlen and Günther Anders wrote in the Germany of the 1930s and, while both developed the brand of 'philosophical anthropology' initiated by Max Scheler and Helmuth Plessner, they negotiated the political demands of their day in different ways. Gehlen was an opportunist who gained certain academic advantages from the new constellation of power in Germany after 1933. Indeed, in the summer semester of that year, he took over the chair of Paul Tillich in Frankfurt, who had been removed from his post by the Nazis and forced into exile. Anders, by contrast, was an outsider: a student of Heidegger and Husserl, who, like his cousin Walter Benjamin, was shunned by the Frankfurt School mandarins. Originally named Günther Stern, he changed his name to Anders (meaning different), fled the country (first for Paris and then for Los Angeles), divorced his wife (Hannah Arendt), and spent the war working in a Hollywood costume shop. If Anders is best known for his efforts to develop a non-Heideggerian approach to technology in *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* (1956) – still untranslated in English – and his work in the antinuclear movement, it is his earlier work, which developed in startling parallel to that of Gehlen, we want to remember here.

The starting point for both thinkers is an attempt to develop an 'anthro-biological' conception of the human being. Departing from the 'philosophical anthropology' of Scheler and Plessner, Gehlen sought to develop a distinctive approach by arguing that the contemplation of 'human nature' is itself part of 'human nature'. He saw a problem fundamental to human existence that he expressed, in a phrase borrowed from Nietzsche, by describing the human as the 'not yet determined animal'. Gehlen's anthropology is thus concerned with the determination of the human in a dual sense: on the one hand, based on the human need for self-interpretation; on the other, this 'deficient being', who has been denied a secure existence guided by instincts and who

lacks innate forms of adaptation to the environment, is determined by means of lifestyles that provide a secure orientation. The human is a threatened and vulnerable being who establishes a basis for long-term survival by creating interlocking systems of order – primarily institutions.⁸

Gehlen's anthropological orientation thus focuses right from the start on a program of social stabilisation. And, while he wanted to present his work as 'objective', it clearly has political implications. But there is no reason why Gehlen's vision of the human being, who on the motor level is so inventive and versatile, must necessarily lead to a conservative theory of stabilisation. Gehlen was compelled in this direction because of the one-sided nature of his own premises and findings, since, based on his anthropological theses alone, one could also identify possibilities for the emancipation of the human being. Indeed, this is the path taken by Anders, who starting independently from the human/animal distinction as outlined by Scheler, develops in two texts published in the 1930s under the name Günther Stern – 'Une interprétation de l'*a posteriori*' (1934) and 'Pathologie de la liberté' (1937) – a theory of freedom.

Like Gehlen, Anders begins by arguing that the human, unlike the animal, is 'world-open' (not adapted to any particular environment or without a world that comes with it). And he then poses, as the basis of his understanding of liberty, the question of the posteriority of the world (in tension with the Heideggerian problematic of being already installed in the world). The issue thus becomes how to position liberty within the tension between being-in-the-world and creating a world (or, if you like, between the *a priori* and *a posteriori*). A position that Anders then complicates by arguing that *a posteriori* experience is included in the *a priori* essence of the human. The point is not to elaborate the details of this argument, which like that of Gehlen, is an artefact of intellectual history. Rather, it is to emphasise the possibility of an approach that stresses dynamic tensions between stability/fixing and basic human vulnerability rather than the urge to completely trump that which is uncontrollable or unorganizable through the establishment of security.

In a way, these approaches could be characterised as peculiarly early 20th century rehearsals of a perennial thematic: order versus chaos. Still, the departure from the question of the human animal has a peculiar relevance in the contemporary situation, if only because one way of describing the shift to post-Fordist modes of capitalist organization is to say that they involve the putting to work generic human capacities: intellect, perception, the linguistic-relational abilities, the general adaptability to environments, etc. Many will recognise in this way of understanding contemporary capitalist development a central feature of Italian *postoperaista* thought as developed by figures like Christian Marazzi (2002) and Paolo Virno (2003). But we want to extend the arguments of these thinkers by suggesting it is no longer possible to uphold Gehlen's claim that the institution is the cultural form that protects against the brute precariousness of life. This is because existing institutions are no longer the providers of stability. Rather, in the current neoliberal environment, they have become the loci of

8 These arguments are most developed in Gehlen (1988).

insecurity and precariousness, and not only in the ways in which they organize labour power.

Institutions, in this sense, are no longer institutions at all. Take the example of the university, which, one might say, has lost its monopoly over the production of knowledge in much the same way that the state has lost its monopoly over the production and control of law or the factory over the production of economic value. Power no longer seeks its justification from particular institutions and their functions (the factory produces, the hospital takes care of illness, research is done in the university, the military takes care of war). Rather it operates on the bare conditions of action or the possibilities of life in general. It does not commit itself to any particular institution or task, but rather seeks legitimacy from public opinion and the ethically right: ethics and public opinion replace formal law and its institutions as the basis of legitimacy. And thus power has no fixed point of reference (like formal law, the normal state, or the specific task of an institution). Rather it seems to change from day to day. It has become arbitrary or, indeed, mad (Virtanen and Vähämäki, 2005).

All of this is played out against a situation of general precariousness, project to project, where the worker must put to work his or her entire personality, experience, feeling and abilities of communication, only to be left alone when the funding dries up. And the situation pertains not only to temporary or casual work, but goes all the way up the food chain, through systems of performance management, audit culture, as well as the ubiquitous pressures for the time of life to cede to the time of work. But far from being a situation to bemoan or spark nostalgia, this is a vista of possibility. Since, it is precisely the fact that power seeks to control the generic human capacities that should make us strong. Given the way in which everyone is driven to constantly escalating levels of activity (and the individual revolt of past generations has been integrated as a kind of autonomy of self-management), we shall not escape this fate by any return to the state bureaucracies or fidelity to the existing institutions. What must be invented instead is a kind of radically different form of institution – one that can intervene and work with this situation of precariousness rather than simply reacting to it.

One of the important things to recognise in the actual functioning of crucial institutions is that the border between the inside and the outside of the institution has become blurred. Maybe this has to do with the fact that a new institutional environment is in the making, that new kinds of relations between the environment of institutions and the environment of society can be forged. The question then becomes how to create new institutions, new political spaces and concepts, rather than simply defending the old institutions or, as some would have it, defending politics. Such institutions would need to arise in the social forms that networks and other forms of cooperation develop as part of their daily life. But, in so doing, they should never entertain the fantasy, with Gehlen, of the stabilisation of precariousness through the imposition of rigid structure. Rather, in the manner of Anders, they would have to remain open to the brute precariousness of human potentiality while simultaneously recognising that this potentiality is necessarily installed in the world. It is in this immanence that we need to become attuned to the intersections of experience and movement, as well as the ways in which they are constrained or enabled by modern institutions.

A Note on Technics

It was Mario Tronti who, in his short but jolting essay 'Lenin in England', pointed most starkly to the dangers that arise when organization meets institution: "But continuity of organisation is a rare and complex thing: no sooner is organisation institutionalised into a form, than it is immediately used by capitalism" (1979: 6). Organization here seems to work at odds to institutionalization. The emergence of form is fatal or, at least, marks the moment of incorporation. But Tronti is not altogether pessimistic about the production of new institutional forms, particularly when forged under conditions of creative struggle. "[I]n place of the bureaucratic void of the general political organisation", he writes, workers "substitute the ongoing struggle at factory level – a struggle which takes ever-new forms which only the intellectual creativity of productive work can discover" (6). Since writing 'Lenin in England', however, Tronti has become convinced that this struggle on the factory floor has been lost, and, significantly, he attributes this defeat to the technical dimensions of the revolution within work:

There is reluctance to confront the bitter theme of the political consequences that the revolution within work has had upon society. The fragmentation of the left social bloc begins with the loss of the centrality of the working subject. This, in turn, was effected technically. The theme of the tragic impact of technics on the dimension of being of the 20th-century was assumed only by the great conservative philosophical consciousness and by late bourgeois art. The workers movement, even from the height of its great experiences, stuttered on this, equivocated, deluded itself, and finally was left behind. (Tronti, 1998: 99, our translation)

Technics here, as in Carl Schmitt's (1996) pronouncements concerning modernity's reduction of politics to administration, is understood in an essentially Aristotelian sense: as that which does not contain within itself the principle of its own movement, or, in other words, that which is without origin. How does this supposed lack of determination relate to the seeming limitlessness of experience and the seeming need for determination in politics? And what might this tell us about the potentialities of technics, particularly in relation to the emergence and sustainability of networked institutional forms? In other words, how can we move beyond the negative vision of technics articulated by the "great conservative philosophical consciousness" to understand their contribution to 'intellectual creativity', labour and political organization in the present moment?

Such questions call for different routes into thinking technics and it is instructive here to recall the relation between technics and political form, as portrayed in Gillo Pontecorvo's film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). Similar to accounts of the Vietnam War, *The Battle of Algiers* is a film that depicts the guerrilla tactics of insurgency forces pitted against the initially formal technics of French colonial military apparatus as they played out during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-62). While the socialist National Liberation Front (FLN) was a party-political form resulting from the merger of smaller political groups in 1954, the FLN's structure of communication and organization was more akin to the logic of the network. In *The Battle of Algiers* this is made most clear in a scene where the leader of the colonial military forces explains the command and attack structure of the insurgents. Lieutenant-Colonel Mathieu Philippe – previously a member of the French resistance, campaigns in Italy and Normandy, and served in Madagascar, Suez, Indo-China and Algeria – begins briefing his staff upon

arriving in Algiers, noting the military is dealing with “A dangerous enemy moving both on the surface and below”:

We have to start from zero. We know something of the organization’s structure ... It’s a pyramid organization ... composed of various sections which, in turn ... are made up of a series of triangles. At the apex is the Chief of Staff responsible to the political bureau. He nominates someone to be responsible for one sector: No. 1. No. 1 selects another two: Nos. 2 and 3. And so triangle 1 is formed. Nos. 2 and 3 each select two men. Nos. 4, 5, 6 and 7. Because of this structure, each member of the organization ... knows only three other members. The one who chose him ... and the two he chose. Contact is only in writing. That’s why we don’t know our enemy. Because, in fact, they don’t know each other. If we know him we can eliminate him. The military angle is secondary. It’s the ‘police’ side that matters. I know you dislike that word. But it’s the only one that sums up our task. We must try to reconstruct the pyramid and identify the Chief. The basis of our job is information. The method, interrogation. Conducted in such a way to ensure we always get an answer. In this situation, false sentiment leads only to ridicule ... and impotence ... we need an incident which will legalize our actions ... and make them feasible. We ourselves must create this opening. (Pontecorvo, 1966)

The military progressively incorporate the tactics of insurgents, though there is always a struggle to articulate such tactics within the form of the military apparatus. The insurgents, by contrast, are able to mobilize across the city space as a network of cells – a structure now commonly known as the *modus operandi* of anti-state and anti-colonial forms. Later in the film, as the insurgency suffers debilitating attacks, the question of governance – as detailed above – becomes secondary to the criterion of movement: “How do we move?”, asks a younger insurgent. “We change methods”, responds the senior member. With torture and indiscriminate violence directed against the FLN by the military, along with increased surveillance, body-searches and check-points, the insurgents fight a battle on two fronts: against the military and the waning support of civilians. Their response is not only to become indistinguishable from civilians – already an established method – but to pass as women, submerging from the field of visibility by wearing the hijab. By this stage, however, the entire civilian population is classified as the enemy, and any movement throughout the city is deemed a potential threat to colonial rule. Passing as women does not result in victory against colonial rule. The military were to claim victory of the battle. Ultimately, however, the desire for independence among Algerians was a continuum that transcended any temporary reassertion of colonial authority.

The unfolding of narrative is not our prime interest in this film. Narrative analysis, in this case as in so many others, is likely to focus on the moment of ideological closure – that moment, in other words, of restoration – rather than the propulsive energy necessary for the story to *go on*. Such analysis is also likely to get side-tracked in historical parallels and allegorizing, which cannot help but become trapped in moralizing – if not theologizing – judgements about the relative goodness of state power and networked forms of political life. Either this, or the over-familiar process of deconstructing such judgements, as if the difference between modern state forms and networked institutional forms is of no consequence.

Such deconstruction is evident in narratives such as Martin Scorsese’s film *The Departed* (2006), which, through the presence of double-agents and hybrid operators, strives to make the point that sovereign police and their insurgent counterparts cannot be easily distinguished. The same insight haunts critical commentaries on security and

terror – like Giorgio Agamben’s much circulated editorial in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (2001), which remembers that “the first major organization of terror after the war, the *Organisation de l’Armée Secrète* (OAS), was established by a French general, who thought of himself as a patriot, convinced that terrorism was the only answer to the guerrilla phenomenon in Algeria and Indochina”. We cannot ignore the fact that following the events of 11 September 2001, governments of all stamps have seized the opportunity to label their anti-state dissidents and activists as terrorists. But simply to disavow this name-calling is to miss the political point. Since what distinguishes networked dissidents or activists from terrorists is not so much their organizational form as *what they do* (a difference of immense political import). It is from such *doing* that we must begin if we wish to retrieve the relation between technics and movement, or more precisely, technics and processes of subjectivisation, where subjectivisation itself is predicated on movement. Such an inquiry also calls for rethinking empirics beyond a research technique that stabilizes the world as a field of objects and, instead, engages the movement of contingencies inherent to immanence and processes of subjectivisation.

In this regard, it is crucial to remember that the Leninist imperative to action, *to do* – that all important moment of political rupture in which organization might take form – was always framed as a potentiality or a question: ‘What is to be done?’ In his dialogue with Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze links this imperative to action to a non-representative politics: “Representation no longer exists; there’s only action – theoretical action and practical action which serve as relays and form networks” (1977: 206-207). But, as with every attempt to understand how action takes place within networks, this formulation begs the political question – the question of the decision. If there are only relays and networks, how can decisions inhere in positive ways? Distribution and decisiveness seem to work in opposite directions. And this seems the constitutive condition of networks, a situation most often understood as a conflict between vertical and horizontal modes of organization. To begin to work through this dilemma, a process that may be without end, we might do better to turn to the writings of Félix Guattari (1995) than to those of Deleuze, since Guattari’s notion of ‘asignifying potential’ not only counteracts representation (in its rejection of Saussure’s notion of language as a bridge or link between two masses) but also brings action into necessary relation with potentiality – the very trigger of (spatial and temporal) movement.

This is not the place to offer an account of Guattari’s ground-breaking efforts in the organization of group experiences, articulation of collective speech and production of new cultural and material configurations. It is no longer 1968 and we realize that some readers may find this kind of experimentation just too touchy-feely. Paolo Virno’s (2005a) explorations of ‘innovative action’ offer a more rigorous account of such generative transformations in a way that, importantly, tackles some of the shibboleths of modern political thought. Here, creative action becomes associated with a kind of state of exception. True innovation, as opposed to the formally indifferent modification of the commodity, involves a distributed decision that cannot be referred to any normative condition or application of grammatical rules. Rules, as Wittgenstein observed in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1963), can never stipulate their application. For example, there is no rule that specifies how high the tennis ball can be thrown during service. To regulate this one needs another rule, and so on to infinite regress – the juridical model

of legal precedent implied by the normativity of the modern state. The creative action then is not simply one that breaks rules (simultaneously affirming them in the act of transgression) but an action that changes the grammatical system itself, operating in a space where the grammatical rule cannot be distinguished from the empirical event.

The parallel here to the political state of exception is intentional. But far from comparing the creative action to the sovereign decision, Virno conceives this action as a kind of non-sovereign decision or, if you like, an exception-from-below. Rather than an affirmation of sovereign power (with all its implications of a contractual passage from the 'state of nature' to 'civil society'), the creative action is understood as an *exodus* from the sovereign bind. As Virno puts it in another essay, the creative action is the "reversed correspondent of the state of exception" (2005b: 19, our translation). In both cases a fundamental ambiguity invests the relation between grammar (the rules of a certain system) and empirical fact (the everyday events to which these rules should apply). But only in the latter is this imagined as the result of a monopolised decision.

A further insight can be gained into this difference if one compares Hobbes to Wittgenstein on the problem of the infinite regress established by any normative system of rule. In *Leviathan* (1994) [1660], Hobbes argues that such regression can only be broken by the obligation to obey that announces the exit from the 'state of nature' and establishment of a unitary political body. In the common interests of self-preservation and security, each subject must tacitly consent to the proposition 'I will not disobey' and recognise the validity of the law even before any concrete law has been laid down. For Wittgenstein, however, such infinite regress raises the problem of the uniform application of rules: "[W]hat if one person reacts in one way and another in another to the order and the training? Which one is right?" (1963: 206). To break the reference of this question back to an infinite series of norms, Wittgenstein proposes to adjudicate the matter in relation to "the common behaviour of mankind" (206). Instead of arguing, as does Hobbes, that the regress of law requires a sovereign intervention that transcends the 'state of nature,' he refers this matter back to fundamental (natural or biological) qualities that are generic to the human animal: the capacity for linguistic communication, adaptation to and alteration of environmental circumstances and so on. As Virno puts it: "far from anchoring the application of rules to the exit from the state of nature, Wittgenstein installs natural life in the very heart of historically determined institutions" (2005b: 20, our translation).

But what happens in an environment today when the neoliberal state undergoes a process of disaggregation, if not deinstitutionalisation? At what point, if ever, will there be an indistinguishable homology between state form and network form, a mimicry effect or elective affinity as Benjamin understood modernity? We can be sure this will never happen, since there are two key dimensions that withstand the possibility of mutual assimilation or total equivalence: time and power. In other words, the seemingly impossible tension between distribution and decision can never be overcome. There is no dialectical process that might resolve this conflict in a higher order of sovereign rule or democratic consensus. This is why it is so mistaken to conceive of networks as democratic institutions. Since democracy, at least in its actually existing forms, requires the auto-legitimizing and mystical identification of sovereign power with a bordered political subject – it has always been, and remains, the *kratos* of the *demos* (Mitropoulos

and Neilson, 2006b). Networks do not apportion membership or citizenship. They cannot be hijacked to the legislative model of the parliament or the representative model of the election. This is not to disavow the complex problem of network governance. But it is to recognise that, in conceiving the potentialities inherent in networks, we must heed the difference between law and institutions. To remember again the words of Gilles Deleuze: “The institution is always given as an organized system of means ... law is a limitation of actions, institution a positive model for action” (2004: 19).

The Experience of Networks

Can experience function as a generative principle in the creation of new institutional forms immanent to the dynamics of social-technical networks? There are tensions if not contradictions internal to such a question. Experience as a principle would suggest the return of technics as procedure. Life, however, is never separable from technics and, as noted earlier, experience, as a source of invention and transformation, is distinct from experiment. The former holds a processual dimension, the latter a procedural rule. How, then, is technics to be understood as it subsists within the realm of experience?

The distinction between experience and experiment is most clearly embodied at the borders of what might be termed the neoliberal experiment – a program that systematically subjects and connects the triad of state-corporation-citizen to the uncertainties of the movement (migration) of finance capital and labour-power. Experience is that which accumulates, passes by and is communicated or distributed. But such a comprehension of experience also falls, partially, into the trap of a linear, developmental and historical progression of thought, as Vilém Flusser points out, where “the object was to gather one experience after another” (2003: 68). Space must also be granted to the discarding of experience, its redundancy or dirty stain on our psyche.

The experiment disavows precarity, since the experiment presupposes security – laboratory conditions. Practice (politics) is immanent to experience. How then to communicate experience? Communication is not narrative. There is no reproduction of structure that enables the semblance of order. Narrative implies a consensus. There is no consensus, hence the need to think politics in a non-representational form. Communication shares more with affect, and this, really, is so often the precondition for collaboration with others. Do you really understand what an other is saying? This is especially the case for those working across linguistic borders, where syntax is broken and recomposed by translation. So often it is a sense or intuition that one can engage another and others again in the formation of action or, as the case may be, ‘communication with ends’.

Herein lies the enormous difficulty of inventing new institutional forms. While it is possible to speak of a concept of the constitutive outside immanent to hegemonic systems, no such outside exists for experience. We are always within experience. No escape. In this sense, it is possible to say that we submit to experience. This marks another distinction from experiment, where in a world of choice one decides to be part of an experiment, engage in experimentation, or to take the option to decline (although

with the rise of practices of informed consent the borders between coercion and assent have been blurred). No such choice is possible with experience, though we would note that experience has also become an option of consumer-choice: 'are you experienced?'

Consumer-choice, however, is not political decision. The phenomenological aspect or dimension of experience is not reducible to what Foucault, in *Society Must be Defended*, terms the "whole field of visibility" (2003: 242), commensurate with techniques and technologies of surveillance, control and consumer-motivation. If there is a counter-power to be found in experience it rests in its surfeit of expression without any continuous form – what Foucault calls the non-discursive, which we understand here as the expression of practice as it subsists in experience. The problem lies in the movement from experience in general to singular experiences, since, as Deleuze notes, "every individual experience presupposes, as an *a priori*, the existence of a milieu in which that experience is conducted, a species-specific milieu or an institutional milieu" (2004: 19). When such a milieu is a network, there will always be a multiplicity of experiences, contingent and contradictory. The difficulty lies in giving political form to this multiplicity – to determine the indeterminate, or better, to keep moving between absolute indetermination and total closure.

Here it is necessary to remember, as does Alexander Galloway (2004), that networks too have their protocols and modes of control. We live today in a world of embedded software, where our click-paths and other trafficked movements are subject to constant monitoring of which we remain largely unaware (Graham, 2005). Under these circumstances, the two poles of power so familiar to late twentieth century theorists – the surveillant assemblage and the micro-practices of everyday life – intertwine and collapse. To put it in terms familiar from Michel de Certeau (1984), strategy and tactics coalesce. Rather than sitting in opposition, strategy and tactics continually alter and work upon each other to supply a stream of data that, once collected and correlated, serves not only to exclude and marginalize but also to give privileged movement to those who obediently work and consume (or even just travel the world with the right skin colour and last name). It has become common to remark that such 'software-sorted' control can only be interrupted at the level of code. The hacker, or for some the 'hacker class' (Wark, 2004), becomes the new revolutionary subject, disrupting the smooth functioning of information-driven capitalism and searching out relations beyond the property form. But simply to intervene at the level of code is not yet to explore the limits of codified knowledge itself. The hack, as much as it is a 'creative action', cannot in itself give sustainable form to networked multiplicity.

"Everybody experiences far more than he understands", writes Marshall McLuhan. "Yet it is experience, rather than understanding, that influences behaviour" (1964: 318). McLuhan's insight is worth recalling when it comes to networks, since, as we indicated earlier, the attempt to understand networks, to turn them into objects of theory (with an attendant catalogue of terms and concepts), often displaces an investigation of their political functioning. This is especially the case when networks are conceived as wholly decentred or horizontal structures. Apart from being technically incorrect – for instance in the case of the Internet – this assumption occludes many of the political complexities surrounding networked organization and the organization of networks. Indeed, the crucial challenge in giving a sustainable political form to networks – one that might

supersede the short-term and stay-small ethos of many exercises in free cooperation and horizontal collaboration – may not be to recognize and mobilize the vertical forms of organization that inhere in such practices but to enter and work through the horizontal-vertical opposition – a continuous process of elaboration.

After all, to continue to conceive networks in terms of horizontal-vertical relations is to remain caught in the political anthropology of modern representation, which identifies differentiated subjects along the horizontal axis only by virtue of a second identification that gathers them together and represents them on the vertical axis. Is this really how networks work? Certainly, one could remark that the power exercised by some actors in networked environments, for instance by mailing-list moderators or domain-name owners, is more feudal or proprietary than representative. But are these relations any better described by available theoretical notions such as the focal actor, problematization or the obligatory passage point?⁹ To accept McLuhan's observation about experience and behaviour is not to indulge some anti-theoretical broadside but to recognize that the kinds of relations that subsist in networks might better be described in terms of contexts than ideas.

Experience is never pure. It is always contaminated by contingencies and errors. If we refuse to fetishize our networked relations, to turn them into concepts, but instead treat them in the particular contexts in which they may or may not be established, a whole new series of questions emerges. What kinds of relations are possible in this situation? What is the work they do? Who are the people they are working with? What are the strings attached? The questions cease to be about ideas and become instead problems that require the gathering of more information. Rather than establishing a definitive model of networked relations, we are left with the need to constantly develop new practices of organization as we move on, meet new challenges, search out points of leverage and conjunctural possibilities that link different struggles, and make decisions along the way.¹⁰

What does this have to do with political form? For a start, it forces us to understand form not as an abstraction but rather as rooted in concrete existence. At stake is neither a transcendental notion of form, as in the Kantian understanding of space and time, nor a purely technical-instrumental one: decision is not precision. Furthermore, form need not be conceived in absolute terms. Thus, in approaching networks or any other kind of institutional form, let's say universities or museums, it is unnecessary to treat them as concepts defined by certain features – for instance, hierarchy – which then either allow or disallow their linking to other kinds of institutions, defined equally in conceptual terms – say, horizontality. As regards the sustainability of networks, this is a crucial point since, while they may maintain a relative institutional autonomy, networks may also need to engage other institutional partners to facilitate their survival. This is particularly the case when it comes to issues of funding. As one of us wrote in an article with Geert Lovink: “There are no global funds for global networks” (Lovink and

9 These are all notions in circulation within the actor-network theory developed by thinkers like Callon (1986) and Latour (2005). For definitions see http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc_data/ant_dff.html, visited 14 November, 2006.

10 Nunes (2005) develops a similar list of questions concerning networked pragmatics.

Rossiter, 2005). For this reason, networks have often been sustained by free labour. The provision (or diversion) of funds may be the most useful capability of the modern state that networks can redeploy. The challenge is to manage this interface in ways that neither involve the obligations of patronage nor fall into patterns of governance that fetishize outcomes and limit action and expression.

In calling for the invention of new institutional forms we do not want to perpetuate the modernist fantasy that the existing world must be obliterated before a new one can begin. Anyone who has visited 'planned cities' like Canberra or Brasilia will know the soulless remnants such *tabula rasa* thinking leaves behind. It is no accident that these places are the seats of parliaments and other state institutions. Nor is it a surprise to learn that the squalid high-rises of the Parisian *banlieues* are the progeny of Le Corbusier's utopian projections. Political organization must work with the resources at hand. We cannot afford to project into the future as if we will move only when somebody else has built the new institutions for us. This is the logic of consumption: construct the new institutions and then we will decide whether they are worthy to replace the old. This is also the logic of sovereignty, as it assumes a preconstituted subject who will exercise the power of decision. To address the conditions of networked multiplicity, political action must (almost paradoxically) be partial – or partisan, to use a stronger term. The danger is that such partiality, insofar as its break from (or displacement of) the existing institutions is precisely partial (incomplete), can easily be absorbed back into a prevailing pluralism – resulting in just more governmentality and liberalism. This is the appropriation we must fight. Already we have seen many – whole political generations even – take that path. But the struggle has no clear resolution, since it involves the continual, if not interminable, working through of the relation of partiality and multiplicity, determination and indetermination. This is the difficulty of constructing new institutions. It cannot be deferred. The space and time of new institutions is *here and now*.

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