

WHY BOTHER WITH THE INFRAPOLITICAL? A QUESTION OF (JUST) EXISTENCE

Gareth Williams

The University of Michigan

DOI:10.17450/180213

The infrapolitical is the thinking that flickers on the tremorous limit at which the end of the representation of historical progress is finally realized and the metaphysical indulgences of previous vital, political and ideological illusions (such as the bourgeois foundations of fraternity, equality, and liberty) founder and run aground, rising up, nevertheless, in increasingly vitriolic forms as subjectivist reactionary demands for definitive (nationalist, populist, or identitarian) decisions, resolutions, or truths regarding the twilight of the modern. Attunement to a specifically infrapolitical register in thinking gives no credence to the overcoming of political disenchantment in the name of fidelity to the unifying inheritance of ‘the commons’ since the infrapolitical comes to the fore in the realization (which cannot be merely confused with eschatology) that “nothing remains any longer in which the hitherto accustomed world of humankind could be salvaged; nothing of what has gone before offers itself as something that could still be erected as a goal for the accustomed self-securing of human beings” (Heidegger, 2015, p. 154).

In Marxian terms, while the Westphalian interstate system that reigned until 1971 came to be an imperial-national order capable of fomenting but also of mediating and restraining competitive relations between the relative values (GDPs) of national bourgeoisies—in other words, while political and economic modernity was anchored for centuries in the calculable, and therefore representable (or at least agreed upon), value of gold (and then in arbitrarily fixed exchange rates still held to the value of gold after the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference)—our current de-metalized, ‘dollarized’ and

fully unrestrained quest for surplus value on a planetary scale has unleashed the violent demise of an economic and political architectonic grounded in geographical and economic commensurability, thereby producing an ever-changing and de-territorializing shift in, and never ending conflict between, different manifestations and perceptions of the very idea of value (relative and therefore absolute).¹ Contemporary global capital is predicated on the anchorless, deterritorializing, increasingly rapid circulation of and competition between relative values, and the opening up of ever-new fault lines and border zones for the further extraction of value. These post-national frontiers inaugurate the dismantling of traditional legislative mediations and legal structures (the modern state-form, for example), to such an extent that the *anomie* that has always been internal to *nomos* becomes, in its post-Cold War ascendance, the active and on-going *absenting* of the modern state's ability to mediate between *logos*, constituted power, political space, and modern forms of institutional restraint.

Globalization is the setting in motion of the demise of the modern mediations of relative value. It is their displacement into a monstrous quest, beyond all certainties regarding the value of value itself, for the absolutization of surplus value. Furthermore, it is capital's monstrous quest for surplus value—that is, for the ultimate spoils of self-destruction—that allows Carlo Galli to observe that globalization *is* global war itself. It is the unrestrained world of an absolutely decontained civil war (of *stasis* fully unleashed on a planetary scale) which is nothing more than the on-going perishing, the very form of ending, of modern political space itself without an alternative sovereign order or topographical arrangement in sight, and hence with no enduring location from which to anchor either transgression or transcendence. The post-Westphalian order is the Westphalian order in violent, limitless, *autoimmune* mode, and, as such, it is by definition only ever a matter of perpetuating finitude.

It is clear by now that the contemporary indistinction between war and peace on a global scale marks the active and on-going destruction of Kant's attempted yet impossible approximation to perpetual peace and the inter-state order of restraint. As Heidegger put it, "What is as yet ungraspable, and yet imposing itself and intruding everywhere in the realm of the uncomprehended, is the disappearance of the distinction between war and peace" (Heidegger, 2015, p. 154). It is as a result of the disappearance of this distinction between war and peace—a disappearance that inaugurates the incomplete liquidation of

1. By the 1950s and 1960s the U.S. had effectively become the world's bank. In 1971 the Nixon administration officially broke the dollar's link to gold. U.S. debts had become un-payable and rather than honor its obligations in gold, the U.S. government essentially defaulted. See Klein (2018).

modern legislative and juridical restraint, the on-going ruination of modern sovereignty, the invalidation of the regulative idea of reason itself, and, as such, of the very presence of reason—that the infrapolitical emerges with no school, founding principle, or specific methodology to orient or determine it. Having said that, what is suggested by the suffix *infra* (rather than by, say, the *sur* of surrealism or the *meta* of metaphysics) is the necessity of an engagement with the horizon and materiality of autoimmunity, ruination, finitude and death. It does not function solely in the name of the “actuality” of politics. While coextensive with the political, it strives to remain attuned to the ontological presuppositions of the political, to that which remains prior to the concealment and oblivion that political reason—the calculations of the relation between means and ends—installs in the name of the *partages* of social privilege. For this reason, the infrapolitical register’s primary differential gesture toward thinking is located in its attunement to the existential, rather than just to the moralizing political indignations (the states of identitarian injury, will to power, hegemony) of both Right and Left, which serve only to highlight the distinct nihilist forces of humanist subjectivism.

On a purely sociological level connected to the on-going and deepening crisis of liberal democracy—a crisis that has also installed the collapse of its concomitant ideologies of revolution and emancipation—it could be said that the infrapolitical register in thinking derives in part from the realization that a turn and a democratizing exodus or subtraction from the unjust yet increasingly virulent political calculations of neoliberal and post-neoliberal globalization (in which the ‘post-neoliberal’ refers to the effects of neoliberalism applied and now experienced as both state-form and unbounded planetary and human value extraction *in extremis*) are incumbent upon us.

Again, on a purely sociological level one can look toward symptoms such as the on-going political and social debacles experienced under the auspices of Catalanian secessionism, ‘Brexit’, or the vociferous yet somnambulistic claims to a collective recollection of a time prior to the current catastrophe via the *Make America Great Again!* brand. But one can also consider the myriad forms of right wing populisms that range from the “cultural” defense of the welfare state by wholesome Scandinavians embracing the historical values of the extreme Right, to the blatant anti-immigrant racism and defense of the land against all non-white “invaders” voiced in “*Build that Wall!*” One can also ponder, of course, the globalization of financial austerity and the collectivization of public and private debt that accompanies it, the resurgence of right-wing governments in Latin America after over a decade of attempted progressive reform, unfettered resource extraction, mass global migration, climate change, terrorism,

crypto-currencies (the votaries of which broadcast nothing less than the algorithmic ‘de-colonization’ of currency itself in the name of planetary deliverance!), Artificial Intelligence, split-second financialization and high speed trading, the passing of the utopian horizons not only of worker emancipation but of the global “periphery” in its entirety, the increasingly proliferous resistances of injured micro-identities, narco-accumulation, “global war”... the list is endless...

The question “What is the world coming to?” is now the most banal expression of perplexity regarding the nature and character of our times, and simultaneously the most conceptually impenetrable of all possible questions. It is certainly more bewildering now than it was just a few decades ago when President George H.W. Bush prophesized that the collapse of the Soviet empire would mark the beginning of a New World Order. In the wake of the Cold War—during which the disintegration of European territorial empire in the period between the European civil wars of 1914-18, 1936-1939 and 1939-1945 was momentarily re-territorialized under the umbrella of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry of 1948 to 1989—the idea of a specific post-Cold War order, of a historical direction anchoring individual and collective destinies and endeavors, or the very idea of a specific *nomos* of representation and of representability, is no longer available.

It is no longer even clear whether the term *interregnum*, which remains implicit in the previously enumerated symptoms, is sufficient to lend consistency to our understanding of the current predicament. Despite Antonio Gramsci’s singular but by now somewhat banal appropriation of the term—“The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (Gramsci, 1971, p.276)—the word *interregnum* is in juridical terms the secret placeholder of a claim to the re-habilitated destiny of a specific notion of epochality and to its particular form of sovereign rule, for it denotes both a time of sovereign suspension and the containment within itself of the imminence of the suspension of suspension. Now, however, it is beginning to appear that the promise of the latter—of the contained and implicit rehabilitation of linear time from within the *interregnum*—remains definitively beyond grasp, extending its force everywhere in the realm of the incomprehensible and the un-comprehended, while also inaugurating the demand for a different nomenclature indicating something so post-epochal and so post-sovereign in nature that it would have no political or philosophical name other than that of eternal *ruination*, or of a perpetual and potentially creative *autoimmunity* internal to both the closure of metaphysics and to the economies of the post-neoliberal

era.² The figure of the ‘mortal God’ and its regime of representation are falling apart at the seams, but they are doing so without embracing either full-blown anarchy or the roots of a new Age. Nothing here can be resolved. We can merely glimpse that while in former times “force [was] the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power” (Marx, 1976, p. 916), in the contemporary order of planetary value extraction and of the on-going closure of historical progress we have plenty of economic power and force but are left devoid of the transitional linear time required of a new birth, commencement, or avant-garde of any kind. We are well on the way to losing the epochal promise of representation arrested and contained silently in the *inter* of the *interregnum*. The term *impasse*—which, easily enough, is always open to resolution via a sovereign or subjectivist decision—is even less compelling than *interregnum*. Having said that, it is what currently inhabits the decisionist terrain of both the populisms and sovereign authoritarianisms of contemporary globalization, as the demand for meaning at all cost (‘Make things make sense again!’), as if the true meaning of the Age could be revealed as a result of the will to break with the experience of a political dead end that is nevertheless constitutive of the neoliberal market-state duopoly.

Perhaps *decontainment* as global war, understood as the exhaustion of epochality itself, as Reiner Schürmann put it, indicates that it is no longer a question of an old epoch that is coextensive with a linear temporal transition toward the contours and possibility of a new destiny, of a new epoch of representation, but simply that of globalization (which by now cannot even be understood in the same terms as ‘late modernity’ was just thirty years ago) as a perpetual form of ending. In this sense, while the image of a suspended sovereignty names a primary instance of ruination, ruination’s duration and extension occludes suspension without necessarily consummating anything in its place. This *an-epochality*—the decontainment, or boundless disaster, of epochality itself—raises a number of questions, one of which is that of the tendential patterns, if any, which endure in the persistent, limitless autoimmunity that is the post-neoliberal, global order?

Progress and development are on the wane, certainly, and how could they not be? We are living in a state of rapid retreat from the founding metaphors of the entire Enlightenment tradition, including those of the liberal subject, democracy, the human, the Nation, the Republic (fraternity, equality, liberty) and the inter-state order of warfare between sovereigns. As a result, our modern organizing principles—other than those of

2. For more on the question of sovereign suspension in contemporary Latin America, see Villalobos-Ruminott (2014). For a first approach to “post-sovereignty”, see Cabezas (2013).

limitless economic “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey)—are withering away in the face of planetary resource extraction and different forms of proxy war waged as a means for gaining access to surplus value at all cost, while the modern (Kantian) ideal of establishing a connection between thinking and acting—the relation between securing a rational foundation for the knowable and then conforming society’s daily actions to that foundation—has definitively run its course (Schürmann).

Beyond technology, individual self-interest and the relentlessly unforgiving topographies of Thomas Hobbes’ *war of all against all* there is nothing to replace the *nomos* of the Cold War, which is probably why the question of *ethics* has become so commonplace in its well-intentioned regurgitation of liberalism. In globalization the world is coming to nothing, or, there is nothing for the world to come to other than surplus value and destruction, since globalization itself conceals the coming to presence of world (Nancy, 2007). For this reason, the relation between thinking and acting is dominated increasingly by the instrumentalization of *techne* alone, and capital is increasingly extractive in nature. Meanwhile the subjective will to power, or nihilism, which manifests itself not only in the political staging of the oligarchs and their acolytes but in increasingly belligerent exhibitions of populist racism and gender violence, is the one thing that reigns unchallenged, confronted for the most part only with better intentioned contrary wills, but not necessarily with anything *other than* will to power.

No doubt it will be proclaimed by many academic devotees of the resurrection of modern revolution and universal emancipation—by the neo-communist museum curators of the dialectical path to absolute spirit, the academic philological bourgeoisie in search of a loving master and world picture still anchored in the Enlightenment doctrines of the subject—that such a diagnosis suffers from all the decadent, pessimist symptoms of a Leftist melancholy that, tainted ironically by Hegel’s “beautiful soul” (the self-cloistered cult of the beauty of holiness), is more attuned to a state of self-hypnotized inactivity (pessimism, nihilism or just ‘deconstruction’) than it is to concrete moral action (militancy, ‘real politics’ or the ‘communist hypothesis’). But in the infrapolitical register there is no longer any optimism to be placed in either salvation from barbarism (at least not in our inherited socialisms, which have demonstrated that communism is not necessarily the destruction of the capitalist mode of production) or in a *beyond* to disenchantment, which is the underlying desire for a good part of the Left’s boundless fidelity to the subjectivization of the subject.

As already noted, the point of departure for the infrapolitical register is conceptual attunement to the full exhaustion of all historical representations of progress, which,

of course, is very different from suggesting that Marx, for example, was wrong, or that the infrapolitical is antithetical to the act. What it proposes to circumvent are the facile theologisms of the will to power, its metaphysical attachments to historicism, hegemony and the vacuous promises of a *beyond* to disillusionment grounded in the political will of the militant subject. For this reason the infrapolitical register in thinking remains attuned to the *posthegemonic* underpinnings of the political. It never enters center stage but plays and toils in the shadows of every political staging. It is always coextensive to politics but without ever being political per se, for it is its distance from the political—its safeguarding of a place undetermined by the crude calculations of means and ends—that preconditions its inventive nonconformity to the political itself.³ For this reason it is only ever democratic.

What is at stake for the infrapolitical register and for the unfamiliar dimension of the possible that it seeks to move toward is the dignity of the human in the age of decontainment, and this in the full realization that humanism “does not set the *humanitas* of the human being high enough” (Heidegger 1988, p. 251). There can be no doubt that the humanism we have inherited from modernity has made a fundamental “contribution to the history of the armament of subjectivity” (Sloterdijk, 2017, “Rules” p. 204).⁴ In this sense it is nothing more than anthropocentric violence in conceptual and cultural form, since it conceals the *humanitas* of the human while ceaselessly claiming to define and ameliorate it as it moves along the dialectical path toward the truth of absolute spirit (and all of this in the name of progress, the subject, culture, identity, the Nation, representation, gathering, location, home, the familiarization and domestication of the relation between human and world etc.). For the infrapolitical register, however:

Thinking does not overcome metaphysics by climbing still higher, surmounting it, transcending it somehow or other; thinking overcomes metaphysics by climbing back down into the nearness of the nearest. The descent, particularly where human beings have strayed into subjectivity, is more arduous and more dangerous than the ascent. The descent leads to the poverty of the ek-sistence of *homo humanus*. In ek-sistence the region of *homo animalis*, of metaphysics, is abandoned... What counts is *humanitas*

3. Geoffrey Bennington (2016) refers to this distance as “the politics of politics”. From the poetic or infra-structural question of the foundation of writing (1999) to the exhaustion of difference (2001), from the non-subject of the political (2008) to the infrapolitics of the auto-graphic inscription (2016) and the discussions of the Infrapolitical Deconstruction Collective (<https://infrapolitica.com/>), the entirety of Alberto Moreiras’ intellectual trajectory has been dedicated to tracing the conceptual and political aporias of the distance to the political, as a form of inventive nonconformity to university knowledge and to the commonsense politics of hegemony.

4. See Martin Heidegger (1998, p. 244-5): “*Humanitas*, explicitly so called, was first considered and striven for in the age of the Roman Republic. *Homo humanus* was opposed to *homo barbarus*”.

in the service of the truth of being, but without humanism in the metaphysical sense. (Heidegger, 1988, p. 268).

What does this indicate? It does not signal that infrapolitics is predicated on finally uncovering the essence of being (of what Being *is*). It indicates thinking in the *arduous service of ek-sistence*, understood as *being-towards-death* as the abyssal path away from inauthenticity. For this reason, in the infrapolitical register the decision for existence means exposure to a register of decisiveness, of decision-making, and of dignity that remains beyond, yet occluded by, the biopolitical administration of life and the subjectivity that underpins it. It most certainly lies beyond, yet remains concealed by, the primacy of politics or the centrality of subjectivity and the preconceived notions of militant praxis that accompany it.

For the infrapolitical register the decision is the own-making event of the uncovering of existence as fundamental ownlessness (Nancy, 1993, p.102-4). This infrapolitical register is a *quest for an opening* to the thinking of the singular—to Being as ownlessness—and, as such, to the thinking of a fundamental modification in our understanding of the act. This understanding would never cease to uncover the question of the relation between justice and the community of beings, certainly, but would do so in light of Being rather than in light of the biopolitical administration of life and its assignation of social roles, for the latter are only ever indicators of the history of a subjectivist nihilism that always underlies the political coercions of hegemony and counter-hegemony. The infrapolitical, in this sense, is the comportment of a “living leftist principle” (lower case ‘left’) grounded in a fundamental relation of non-conformity to the “metaphysical and technocratic reflexes of humanolotry” (Sloterdijk, 2017, p.142).

The infrapolitical register strives to approach the task of thinking from within the inhabital, which begins with the dismantling of the primacy of the political over existence. This is what the infrapolitical register understands as a turn toward the possibility of an absolutely necessary appropriation, a renewed chance, for the arduous task of a thinking in which subjectivist understandings of property, propriety and value are exposed to the ownlessness of being-towards-death; that is, to the singular work of the un-appropriable distance of the nearness of the nearest; the poverty of the ek-sistence of *homo humanus* that can only be discerned from within the destitution of all metaphysical forms of subjectivism and representation.

References

- Bennington, G. (2016). *Scatter 1: The Politics of Politics in Foucault, Heidegger and Derrida*. New York: Fordham UP.
- Cabezas, O. (2013). *Postsoberanía: Literatura, política y trabajo*. Lanús: Ediciones La Cebra.
- Galli, C. (2010). *Political Spaces and Global War*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Edited and Translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Harvey, D. (2003). *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1977). *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Heidegger, M. (1998). Letter on Humanism. In W. McNeill (Ed) *Pathmarks* (pp. 239-76). Cambridge: Cambridge UP:
- Heidegger, M., (2015). *Koivón: Out of the History of Beyng*. In *The History of Beyng* (pp. 149-67). Translated by William McNeill and Jeffrey Powell. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hobbes, T. (1985). *Leviathan*. Edited by C.B. Macpherson. London: Penguin Classics.
- Klein, M. C. (2018, September 14th). “Why the Euro Won’t Replace the Dollar”. *Barron’s*. (<https://www.barrons.com/articles/why-the-euro-wont-replace-the-dollar-1536945404>).
- Marx, K. (1976). *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume One*. Introduced by Ernest Mandel. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books.
- Moreiras, A. (1999). *Tercer espacio: Literatura y duelo en América Latina*. Santiago de Chile: LOM Editores.
- Moreiras, A. (2001). *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies*. Durham: Duke UP.
- Moreiras, A. (2008). *Línea de sombra: El no sujeto de lo político*. Santiago de Chile: Editorial Palinodia.
- Moreiras, A. (2016). *Marranismo e inscripción, o el abandono de la conciencia desdichada*. Madrid: Escolar y Mayo Editores.
- Nancy, J-L. (1993). “The Decision of Existence”. In *Birth to Presence* (pp. 82-109). Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

- Nancy, J-L. (2007). *The Creation of the World or Globalization*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Schürmann, R. (2003). *Broken Hegemonies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Sloterdijk, P. (2017). The Domestication of Being. In *Not Saved: Essays after Heidegger* (pp. 89-148). Malden: Polity Press.
- Sloterdijk, P. (2017). Rules for the Human Park: A Response to Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism'. In *Not Saved: Essays after Heidegger* (pp. 193-216). Malden: Polity Press.
- Villalobos-Ruminott, S. (2014). *Soberanías en suspenso: Imaginación y violencia en América Latina*. Lanús: Ediciones La Cebra.