Sovereignty in Ruins

A POLITICS OF CRISIS

George Edmondson and Klaus Mladek, EDITORS

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INTRODUCTION

Sovereignty Crises

George Edmondson and Klaus Mladek

We are fortunate to find ourselves living in interesting times: times not simply of change or transition but of universal crisis.[1] History is full of crises, of course. Yet compared to its predecessors, today's crisis feels more permanent and enveloping because it lacks the one certainty they shared: that it will, for better or worse, have an end. When the term *crisis* acquired its contemporary meaning (as a time of social upheaval and epochal transformation) in the late eighteenth century, "the only unknown quantity" was "when and how" the crisis in question would be resolved, and by what means.[2] Today, our ubiquitous crisis consciousness appears to have cast such assurance in doubt. Alain Badiou can usually be counted on to defend robust revolutionary solutions, yet even he contends that the promise of a remedy—an alternative political vision, a new praxis, or a compelling symbolic fiction—"is in a state of total crisis."[3] (Which is exactly why the search for such a fiction remains an urgent political project, as we argue here.) Meanwhile, as if confirming Arendt's observation that there is "no longer any 'uncivilized' spot on earth" and that "we have really started to live in One World," the symptoms of crisis have spread boundlessly to become, in a manner very different from what Carl Schmitt envisioned, the new *nomos* of the earth.[4] How far does crisis extend? Far enough that even the traditional concept of *krísis*, with its spatiotemporal limits and inherent faith in resolution, has itself been thrown into a crisis powerful enough to affect the category of the political as such: its ordering function, its concept of historical and organizing space, even, as the surging critical interest in bio- and zoopolitics attests, Aristotle's definition of the human as the only political animal. More than two millennia on, the very origins of the political are so thoroughly in crisis that the margins of the *apolis*, stalked by the beast and the god, have once again come into view.

To its credit, contemporary political theory has succumbed to neither resignation nor quietism in the face of crisis. On the contrary, a generation of scholars is right now mulling over an array of new political thoughts and forms of life—the outgrowth of a renewed inquiry into the origin and genealogy of political ideas and practices that might yet prove capable of reorienting our future, even in spite of their troubled histories.[5] Yet despite this enormous effort, nothing major seems to have changed in the global political order. The Western democracies have not been swept by a revolutionary tidal wave, while the riots and revolutions of the non-Western world are local and easily contained. Nor do we find many reasons for optimism. In a time of political stalemate and unfettered global capitalism—a time when even the smallest advances in legislation seem impossible and complicit parliamentary systems are dominated by often indistinguishable parties that join together to mouth the vacuous abstractions of an outmoded political vocabulary—there may be many new words and ideas, but there is little material change. Instead, a crisis mode, crouched and paralyzing, affects nearly every field in nearly every segment of life.

That is where the essays gathered together here come in. There was once a time, let us recall, when the sphere of crisis was "conceptually fused" with that of critique.[6] Etymologically, both terms derive from the Greek word κρίσις, or *krísis*, meaning to differentiate, to judge, to select, to decide, to separate; both capture the sense that a situation is at a crucial turning point—that a critical diagnosis needs to be made, a judgment rendered, and a course of action charted. What we now think of as the sharp distinction between crisis as objective event and critique as subjective engagement—between crisis as the concept of an occurrence and critique as an ad hoc practice, part intellectual, part moral, part material-interventionist—doesn't appear until the eighteenth century, when it emerges as a corollary to the development of our modern concepts of history and the subject. But in fact the two concepts had begun to separate long before then, with the result that, over time, krísis came to denote little more than administrative and legal judgments made in the interests of governmental crisis management: a decisionist consciousness focused on delimiting a more encompassing crisis.

This incremental fusion of crisis with the practical dimension of governing would not go unchallenged, however. In the eighteenth century there begins to grow a sense, imperceptible even to some of the radical thinkers who advance it, that the only practice capable of counteracting the drift toward managerial krísis, with its merely restorative forms of critique, was

the neglected philological-philosophical form of critique, now given a new force by the epoch's transformative-revolutionary crisis. Rooted in the philological art of judging texts practiced by the *criticus* or *grammaticus*, this subjective dimension of crisis had long stayed in the shadows, a victim of its own potentiality. For even when not overtly political, both philology and philosophy assured the perpetual recurrence of crisis, in the sense that one form of crisis, critical judgment, held the potential to throw another form of crisis, the decision making called for by governing, into a third form of crisis, the turmoil brought about by potentially infinite division. Where the medical, theological, and legal forms of critique sought to rejuvenate an order in crisis by reforming it, improving it, and consolidating it, this other mode of self-encountering—or, better, enfolding—critique fell back upon itself in the furor of its own power: a critique forever in crisis. The practice of critique, to round it off to a formula, made it possible to arrest decisionist krísis through the divisive act of piling up crises.

To the extent that they share anything at all, the essays assembled here extend that practice of enfolding critique by violently forcing critique back into crisis, restoring both terms to their common etymology precisely by continuing the paradoxical tradition, begun in the eighteenth century, of dividing critique from crisis just enough to allow critique to put all forms of krísis, including its own, into permanent crisis. Simply stated, the essays in this collection model the different ways that critique might reinject crisis, understood as a time of tumult and upheaval brought about by a potentially infinite partitioning, into krísis, understood as a species of determinate decision and judgment. For only so violent a gesture is enough to separate—to put into crisis—the conjunction between the juridical dimension of crisis, with its tendency to couch lawmaking violence as managerial decision making, and the theological dimension, with its faith that all time is a crisis heading toward a resolution, a Last Judgment. In this regard the essays are especially timely, insofar as they remind us that the current time of transition in which we live is not an *eschaton*, not some sort of providential revelation. To believe as much would be to fall back into judgment time, as if today were only an interval in linear time, an interregnum. Our present moment is something else entirely. More than a simple transition from one mode of governing to another, ours is a time of nonsimultaneity. To actualize crisis is thus to extract our time—not the end of time toward which we march, but the time of the end, our intensely historical time, charged with an additional time that is genuine crisis time: a time out of joint, a noncoincidence

with representations of time. All time—historical, salvific, evolutionary—is tinged with a more fundamental form of crisis, one that expresses how thoroughly humankind is out of sync with the horizon of a last judgment and world-historical *chronos*. And it is our crisis judgment, achieved through our political constructions, that conjures that additional crisis-time. As Hamlet says to Horatio, "It will be short. The interim's mine" (act 5, scene 2, line 78). Interim time partitions the time of crisis maintained by the allegiance between the juridical and the political.[7]

To carry out the work of that partitioning, our contributors turn to a variety of conceptual wedges: the impolitical; the impersonal; the category of flesh; the worst; an overturning of the idea of origin; a critique of ancient nomos; a pluralized subject; a theatrical dispersion of sovereignty; the rebirth of a different history. Countering the impulse to reduce politics to modes of management and activism, *Sovereignty in Ruins* insists on the necessity of a theoretical political act prior to what have traditionally been regarded as the practical ends of politics: a voiding in the midst of both nomos and politics in order to alter the very coordinates and vocabularies through which political action might take place.

The volume is divided into three parts, beginning with our own long essay, "Natural History: Toward a Politics of Crisis." Legible both as a freestanding meditation and as a considered response to the questions opened up by its ten companion chapters, this first essay constellates a group of thinkers—Kant, Marx, Foucault, Adorno, Kafka, and Paolo Virno—in order to theorize the central role that natural history plays, both as master category and driving force, in the development of a politics of crisis. For us, natural history is more than, or not only, the mutually negating dialectic it was for Adorno. Natural history indicates the movements of a *physionomos* detectable, for example, in the eternal perishing of groundlessness, in Kant's indestructible and unforgettable will to revolution, in the ungovernable form-of-life enacted by Foucault's "critical ontology of ourselves," in the laws of fermentation that, according to Marx, govern even the capitalist and his products, and in the enigmatic comings and goings of the creature Odradek and the fanatical accountings of the bureaucrat-god Poseidon.

The volume's second part, "Italian Affirmations," opens with an English translation of a short book from 2010 by the Italian historian of political thought Carlo Galli, *Left and Right: Why They Still Make Sense*. In his forceful intervention into contemporary politics, Galli explains that the designations *left* and *right* must be preserved, as they are names for different rela-

tions to the political origin. Whereas Noberto Bobbio's 1994 book *Left and Right: Signification of a Political Distinction* locates the source of the left-right indistinction in the crisis of parliamentary democracy after the collapse of communism, Galli detects a much deeper crisis. Drawing on Schmitt's genealogy of modern politics, Galli argues that the real source of the left-right distinction is the incomplete and accidental manner in which modern politics inherits the very premodern political forms it presumes to overturn and reject. Yet even though contemporary politics might remain bound up with an ambiguous political heritage, it nonetheless inhabits institutional architectures and political terminologies that point to a new chain of active subjectivities and conflictual political spaces outside state politics, ones in which the traditional distinctions begin to get crowded out by emerging questions of ecology, biopolitical potentialities, and new rebellious collectives.

Pitched somewhere between essay and conversation, the section's next piece, "Politics in the Present," records an exchange in which the voice of the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito merges with that of his interlocutor, Roberto Ciccarelli, to create a "third person." The two figures, at once diverging and blending, present a succinct yet comprehensive account of many of the concepts, such as biopolitics, the impersonal, and the impolitical, that have begun to pervade our political terminology and that inform many of the essays assembled here. The result is more than just a précis of Esposito's work to date, however (although it is that). It is also an experiment in a common search for, and presentation of, the crisis in our theological, philosophical, and juridical tradition that will activate the philosophy of immanence and affirmative biopolitics lying dormant there, patiently awaiting its vindication in contemporary thought. At a time when political theory seeks an alternative to the juridical concept of the person that for too long sustained a practice of subordination and exclusion, it is no accident that Esposito's works should be increasingly studied in the Anglophone academy and his philosophy of immunity and life more widely received.

In his wide-ranging essay "*Cujusdam nigri & scabiosi Brasiliani*: Rancière and Derrida," Alberto Moreiras first addresses a blind spot in Hardt and Negri's concept of the multitude and in Marx's view of history and class struggle: the almost inextricable knot between war and production that underlies the question of revolution as well as much of contemporary leftist politics. Are revolutionary movements still part of what Foucault identified as the modern "ontology of war," making them a result of antagonisms inherent in the development of productive forces in the biopolitical economy

of capitalism, or can we detect in them the silhouettes of an alternative political theory that could end politics as war—and as production and self-production? According to Moreiras, Rancière's critique of Derrida's democracy to come, that it advocates a messianic ethics at the expense of political practice and democratic eruption, overlooks (like much of post-Althusserian or neocommunist polemics against Derrida) the degree to which a politics of deconstruction has already destroyed pious visions of history and progress. Moreiras's essay arrives at a defense of Derrida's democratic politics and his ethics of hospitality, with its insistence on the perilous conflicts and potentials that arise with the entrance of the visitor, the friend, or the stranger.

Rounding off the section, Rei Terada's "Pasolini's Acceptance" confronts us with an almost unbearable thought: that politics as such, let alone leftist political activism and revolutionary transformation, is so thoroughly futile and such a farce that a certain posture of acceptance is all that is left to us. Analyzing Pasolini's film *Salò* alongside his essay "Repudiation" allows Terada to track the bewildering intensity of the demand made, and the incendiary effect created, when a deeply political thinker and artist begins to think the unthinkable and accept the unacceptable: that politics has irrevocably ceased to exist and what remains is nothing but the convergence of freedom and slavery, autonomy and control. Terada shows that Pasolini's complete repudiation of the nullity of Italian politics, the vacuity of its political parties, and the disappearance of the people in homogenized capitalist society is neither one more postpolitical reflection on the end of politics nor another search for alternative or impolitical areas of political struggle. In Terada's account, Pasolini's adaptation to the given constitutes a new relation to the damaged world, one carried out through a strangely provocative power of hostility toward the status quo. Pasolini's cinematic cruelty, like his unsparingly critical essay, offers Terada a point of departure for a thought of the worst that dwells outside politics after its utter catastrophe.

"The Endgames of Sovereignty," the volume's third part, revolves around certain lacunae in political philosophy that continue to obsess political thought even as they offer alternatives to its current configuration. Adam Sitze's "Reopening the Plato Question" goes right to the heart of the matter by revisiting political philosophy itself, that unprecedented genre of thought inaugurated by Plato's *Laws* under the auspices of that most imperial of institutions, the colony. Sitze's essay focuses on the conceptual aftershocks stemming from book 3 of *Laws*, where Clinias reveals to his interlocutors that he has been commissioned to settle a new colony. As Sitze shows, the philosophi-

cal activity of inventing a new political order—as if such a thing could be instituted entirely from scratch, as if philosophical lawgiving and wisdom could forgo the memory of past civil strife and the already existing arrangement of *oikos*—will silently shape the course of exploration in the *Laws* and in much of colonialist thought after Plato. Philosophical nomos suddenly acquires a paradigmatic and, if the accusations Badiou levels at the lawgiving apparatuses of late Plato are correct, disastrous name in the emerging discourse of political philosophy, a name born from the immunitarian logic of colonial thinking: to solve the war within the home by constructing the space of a home away from home. The essay focuses on two readings of the *Laws*, Strauss's and Badiou's, that appear to be pitted against one another but that are in fact, as Sitze shows, mutually implicated in a tradition where the relation between law and philosophy is understood as a nonrelation, "an unbridgeable distance between philosophy's open question ('what is?') and law's definitive declaration ('what is')."

Eric L. Santner's "The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty" identifies one possible name for the crisis described in this introduction: flesh. Expanding upon Kantorowicz's study of political theology by tracing the dispersal of sovereignty in postmedieval Europe from the body of the king to the flesh of the people, Santner shows how the flesh that was once contained by sovereign krísis now floods the modern scene, overwhelming and deranging it. This, Santner concludes, constitutes the basic dilemma of our present moment: having rid ourselves of sovereignty's representational regime, we can no longer figure out what to do with the flesh bequeathed to us by the demise of krísis, leaving us with a crisis (an "investiture crisis," as Santner puts it) that the so-called sciences of immanence are no longer capable of managing.

Judith Butler's essay, "Arendt: Thinking Cohabitation and the Dispersion of Sovereignty," takes up Arendt's account of the Eichmann trial in order to derive, out of the text's rhetorical and theatrical dimensions, an imperative regarding the rights of cohabitation. In a dramatic turn of her court report, Arendt invents a scene in which she assumes the role of a judge to directly confront Eichmann in the second person with her own explanation for why he deserves to die. Arendt accuses Eichmann of having abrogated a fundamental principle of human rights that, to this day, no sovereign state has been able to articulate: no one has the right to choose with whom to cohabit the earth. Butler reads this right in terms of the right, grounded neither in natural nor in positive law, that Arendt elaborates in *The Origins of Totalitar-*

ianism: the "right to have rights." Arendt asserts this distinctly social right on the presupposition of a plural subject able to put pressure, through its inherent performative power, on the status of the sovereign exception. Could we even go so far as to rethink the performative more fundamentally, as a dispersion of sovereignty? The cohabitation on earth, and the internal company we keep, are for Butler the two forms of socializing plurality through which Arendt promotes a form of federalist democracy able to guide us beyond the sovereign exception as it is conceived in Schmitt and Agamben.

Andrew Norris begins "Beyond the State of Exception" with a critique of the tendency, common to Schmitt and Agamben (and their followers), to reduce the phenomenon of sovereignty to a largely unhistorical structural category. Opposing itself to the recent critical trend toward understanding sovereignty as the inevitable logical effect of conceptual conflict, Norris's essay advocates for a Hegelian analysis of the concrete universals and actual institutions that generate the moment of sovereign decision. Norris's reading of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* not only explicates the universalizing ethical life of a modern society; it goes further by arguing that only a discussion of subjectivity, irony, and evil allows us to deduce the monarch's exceptional executive powers from Hegel's thought. Hegel deserves credit, Norris argues, for being the first to fully grasp the political potential of Socrates's destructive irony for our times. In a manner very different from the abstract self-determination of romantic irony, Socrates asserts his daemonic subjectivity as a substantive universality in excess of the ethical life of the Greek polis and as a true political art capable of radicalizing the truth of a Sophist project still pressing today: how to create discursive communities and other commons in an atheistic spiritual universe wherein man is the measure. By shifting back and forth between ancient Greece, nineteenth-century Prussia, and contemporary American politics, Norris's study mobilizes Socrates and Hegel as legal, political, and ethical resources for a dialectical alternative to the decisionist and logical concept of sovereignty.

Cary Wolfe's essay, "Humans and (Other) Animals in a Biopolitical Frame," works dialectically to put into crisis the central terms of postsovereignty: *subject*, *life*, *living*, *norm*, *value, equivalence*. Sifting through the work of Foucault, Esposito, Derrida, Levi Bryant, and Martin Hägglund in search of a nonexclusionary, nonimmunitarian *who* (neither human nor nonhuman) to whom things might matter, Wolfe ends by making a case for a paradoxically responsible decisionism, a decisionism that endlessly limits itself by closing off any recourse to a perspective outside the frame of biopolitics. By doing

away with immunity and its reciprocal trappings, Wolfe suggests, we could arrive at an affirmative, and thus far more radical, vision of biopolitics and community, one predicated not on a strict economy of equilibrium but on an uneconomical apportionment of valuation, perspective, and responsibility.

Finally, Carsten Strathausen offers us, in "Thing-Politics and Science," one possible way of practicing a politics of crisis. Ranging widely (the essay touches upon epistemology, the continuing importance of the university as a privileged site of critical engagement, the limitations of Deleuzean singularity, the siren song of vitalism, and the challenges that science poses to the so-called new materialism), Strathausen makes good his point that concepts, too, are objects—and not just objects but objects in relation, objects in conflict. That point is essential, Strathausen argues, for counteracting the incoherence generated, in the first place, by thing-politics' overemphasis on the "cooperative potential of concepts" and, in the second, by its reduction of humans to things. Not only are humans irreducible to things, Strathausen concludes; we remain, as we were for the scientific materialism of the (old) Marxism, the agents of history—that is, the agents of crisis.

One premise of this collection is that a crisis has seized the inherited terms of politics, terms like *sovereignty*, *state*, *liberty*, *party system*, *territory*, and *national community*, to name but a few. That should not be taken to mean, however, that we endorse the view that we live in an age only of confusion, accelerated frenzy, and dread.[8] Our belief is that we live in an age of confusion, accelerated frenzy, and dread that is at the same time an age of delight. Admittedly, it is easy to be awed and dumbstruck by one's own feeling of impotence. But dread, submitting as it does to the confusion supposedly engendered by mobility and flux, only perpetuates the contemporary assumption of an existential struggle for scarce resources and places.[9] Meanwhile, thought incessantly moves, not only to think something new, but to think "the same things differently."[10] Thought itself—and what should a critic do but think and write?—is an agent of crisis, bringing with it both the small shifts and large ruptures that have begun to manifest (or, in some cases, reassert) themselves today, whether in the form of riots, as Badiou holds, or in more taciturn modes of withdrawal.[11] Crisis ought not to be misconstrued as an opportunity for innovation or as the ecstatic vision of an eschatological transition time. Nor should crisis be reduced to an essentially capitalist and bourgeois idea, an obstacle we must traverse in order to realize "the autonomy of biopolitical production" proper to the multitude.[12] To fully assume the consequences of crisis—to wield its positive modes of destruction—will

require more than viewing it merely as a setback in progressive development or as a symptom of the impending collapse of so-called disaster capitalism. The "logic of crisis," as Paolo Virno has argued, both emerges from and affects the crisis of the underlying grammar that sustains the ineluctable background of our customary political thought and life.[13] That descriptive logic of crisis, designed to explore how moments of crisis dissolve the otherwise unexamined ties between what are habitually seen as facts of life and the grammar of norms, can help prepare the thinking of an affirmative mode of crisis, or what could be called a politics of crisis. In such a politics, crisis would be understood not simply as a perilous situation to be overcome but as the unleashing of a commonizing energy to be used. This understanding might then allow us to think the contemporary manifestation of the political with reference to the internal, implicit crisis from which it continues to emerge and whose changing grammar the essays collected in this volume set out, in the interest of enacting the politics of crisis inherent in critique, to explicate.

For just as Nietzsche feared that "we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar," we cannot rid our politics of figures of domination and sovereignty if we continue to believe in a grammar that has sustained our obsession with them.[14] A situation of crisis irrevocably returns us to the fundamental questions and terms themselves: to their grammatical organization, the instances of their enunciation, the origins and scenes in which they emerge, the responses and judgments they compel. In short, crisis returns us to critique.[15] The very form of crisis demands the patient labor of a critique bereft of routine answers, recipes, robust affects, and actions—a critique, in short, mindful of the origin and genealogy it shares with crisis. There are precedents for this: Badiou reminding us of the force of declaration and appearance, Deleuze and Esposito challenging us to invent political terms worthy of the event, Agamben emphasizing the "poetic moment" in the terminology of every political thought. If Agamben is right that behind the "irrevocable exodus from any sovereignty" lies an accord between a power of speech or Marx's "general intellect" and political life—if indeed there can be found a "form-of-life" that does not sever *physis* and *bios* from nomos and *logos*[16]—then it is to be hoped that such acts of naming and thinking will force new practices and living contexts to emerge (and vice versa) until we reach the moment when a form of life converges with experience and the power of thought. Collectively making up a political poetry of thought, these thought acts hold the potential to move us beyond the false

alternative between thought and action toward something truly novel: an active theoretical practice in which the power of speech and the expressiveness of the living and the dead join forces to seize the surrounding contexts devised to immunize against them.

At any rate, they bring us to the impetus for this collection. Critique and the sovereign function share a long and intimate history together, one born from their common root in crisis. The sovereign function has emerged repeatedly from crisis in order to quell crisis, including the crisis of the sovereign's own precarious nature as mortal creature. When Bodin and Hobbes ushered the modern sovereign onto the political stage in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was as a political crisis manager in times of civil war. But that rootedness in crisis also meant that the sovereign became answerable to critique, which is itself intimately linked to the diagnosis and management of crisis. Given their shared history, it is entirely fitting that critique and the sovereign function in its various guises (as state of exception, empire, the master's discourse, and so on) should also share a profound irony. Both have come to be regarded as, at best, vanishing forces and, at worst, obstacles still to be overcome; and yet both have been revived, even reanimated, by the efforts made to banish them once and for all.[17] The nature of this ironic resuscitation has added another twist to Foucault's famous pronouncement that "in political thought and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king."[18] Strictly speaking, Foucault meant by this that we continue to live under the sway of the repressive hypothesis and the idea of negative liberties, and a generation of theorists took up that line of interpretation by eschewing the sovereign and turning their critical attentions instead to the analysis of biopolitical or governmental power and disciplinary regimes. It is no longer enough to say, however, that our clamoring for liberty is itself an implicit recognition of the king's *caput*. For the fact remains that the dread and pleasure once associated with the sovereign have not just been transferred to governmentality; they have also been perfected there. Our continuous attempts to conjure ever more sinister and productive formations of power—the disciplinary, the biopolitical, the teletechnic, the technoscientific, the economic societies, or what Deleuze calls the "societies of control"—what are these if not an unmistakable index for how much we mourn the corpse of the traditional form of politics? It is as though we were in need of an even more dreadful and refined power, one that would finally remedy the insufficiencies of a crisis-ridden sovereign and fill the gap of his vacated throne (a frightening vision indeed if thought to its radical end: the

throne itself missing from the place of lack) so that we might reconfirm our pleasure narrative of tragic struggle, failure, and overcoming. It is as though we wanted nothing more than to believe that we can still resist, subvert, strike blows, or invent counter-*dispositifs* as a form of crossed obedience or loyal disobedience to a superior force.

So let us propose another way of interpreting our failure to cut off the head of the king: rather than assuming that we have moved into a post-Westphalian age ushered in by the demise of the sovereign, let us recognize, as much of contemporary Italian philosophy has done, that the king, empire, and sovereign powers are all alive and well even in and as crisis—that politics remains sovereign so long as we remain enthralled by a repetition compulsion compelling us to redeem crisis. From its inception, politics has assumed different permutations of the sovereign function, from the point of command above the social field to widely dispersed apparatus, from premodern sovereignty to contemporary governmentality.[19] If it is not so easy, then, to throw off the sovereign function, it is precisely because the sovereign, like political economy, is infinitely protean; each one can quickly assume the guise of the other. There is a sovereignty effect at work in the economy, just as there is an administrative organization and providential, eschatological direction—an *oikonomia*—inherent in the sovereign function. To interrogate the one does not then mean evading the other. On the contrary, we are tempted to view the dispositif of sovereignty itself as a sovereign apparatus, one might even say the apparatus of apparatuses (the exceptional apparatus and the apparatus of exception)—that is, as the first, primordial, and generalized form of what Foucault circumscribed with the term *dispositif*.[20] Foucault is ordinarily hailed as the chief thinker of the transitions of power formations, the visionary critic of networks of social micropractices. Yet he early on detected the ways in which sovereignty has the capacity to morph, to adapt itself to any new political economy by appropriating emerging diagrams (the disciplinary, the biopolitical, political economy in general) and overcoding them once again with its concrete strategic demands and mechanisms. Not only is "the problem of sovereignty . . . more acute than ever," according to Foucault. The problem of sovereignty is "never posed with greater force" than once its premodern forms begin to wane: once it needs fresh general principles to function alongside the idea of the social contract and the general will, once it needs more room to maneuver within and above the "art of government."[21]

The enormous staying power of sovereignty is due, then, not simply to

the fact that it has proved impossible to root out. It is due to the fact that sovereignty is continuously returning.[22] Sovereignty might well be regarded, in fact, as the figure of return, the creature of our repetition compulsion: "The king is dead, long live the king! The king is dead, long live the king!"[23] Sovereignty, invented as a secularized successor to divine representation, to its oikonomia and providence, at once compensates for the breakdown of those same medieval categories and also perpetuates them, through a tropological exportation, in modern contexts.[24] As sovereignty's seriality—that long living in continuous dying—suggests, however, there remains one more reason why we have yet to cut off the head of the king: because it is more consoling to maintain the illusion that we can leave behind an interrogation of sovereignty effects than to confront the possibility that the sovereign function might be constitutively ruined—that it might have always existed in a state of continuous perishing. The attraction of postsovereignty is that it means not having to face up to the ruination, the perpetual downfall, of the sovereign function. Following the example of Dario Gentili's anthology *La crisi del politico*, which assembles the most interesting contributions published between 1981 and 1986 in the journal *Il Centauro*, one aim of this collection is to reinvigorate the nexus of crisis and critique by inserting strife, continuous perishing, and a revolutionary reordering into the different permutations assumed by the sovereign function. This might take the form of intervening in the current moment of transition, when the stars seem to have aligned around a new manifestation of empire and sovereignty—of exposing that transition to the crisis out of which it emerged and that it is called upon to manage and heal. The goal here would be to deploy genuine crisis in order to thwart any smooth passage toward a new configuration of the triangle of governmentality, sovereignty, and discipline that, in Foucault's analysis, constitutes contemporary political economy. But the critic might also return to other moments of transition within sovereignty in order to disrupt them after the fact, thereby drawing out the permanence of crisis and the force of negation. Now, though, that permanence and force would constitute a politics of crisis and not simply a descriptive logic of crisis. The thought acts that make up *Sovereignty in Ruins* are intended, in part, to help facilitate that transition from descriptive logic to forceful politics, from an understanding of crisis to its affirmation.

Our interest in permanent crisis was inspired in part by Lacan's reaction to the events of May 1968. In a self-interview included in *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan breaks down his students' revolutionary

outburst to a basic fallacy: any revolutionary aspiration rooted in or instigated by experience cannot break free from experience and is therefore destined to end in a master—that is to say, in an embodiment, a practitioner and beneficiary, of experience. If your aspirations are directed toward a master, Lacan warns, you will get one.[25] Ordinarily, this moment in *Seminar XVII* is invoked to emphasize the passage from S_1 to S_2, the master's discourse to the university discourse. But it might more accurately be read as a critique, not simply of activism or the university, but of the superficial way in which they are pitted against one another, as if they were not already mutually implicated. What matters in the passage is not the transition from S_1 to S_2; what matters is the transformation of the form of knowledge manifested in the university—the university you don't leave when you hit the street in protest. If it is structures that walk the streets, not people, then the aim must be to revolutionize those structures. Activists get so agitated by the enjoyment exhibited by S_1/S_2 that they in turn risk exhibiting the form of enjoyment, the form of a, necessary for their own way of suturing the master with knowledge. They risk becoming a spectacle of enjoyment, when what they need to be doing is making an exodus from the scene. In this, Lacan agrees with Foucault and Derrida (and Agamben, for that matter) that the traditional view of revolution, with its grand narratives and its particular modes of seizing power, must be dismantled in order to remain faithful to the idea of the revolution. What is needed is a revolution, be it philosophical, political, or poetic, of the revolution. What is needed, in short, is something along the lines of what Marx calls, against the drunken spectacle of the bourgeois revolution, the proletarian revolution: something critical, repetitious, self-encountering, accumulative until it reaches the point of no return: a true crisis.[26]

How is such an idea of revolution to be accomplished? It cannot be directed at the sovereign, the target of traditional revolution. But neither can it have as its aim the fantasy of a mastery without the master, a fantasy rooted in the belief that all we have to do to cut off the head of the king is abandon a dream of freedom and turn our critical attentions to the interrogation of disciplinary practices, governmental bureaucracies, and biopolitical dispositifs. Foucault makes a compelling case that "to govern means . . . to govern things" and that "the things . . . with which government is to be concerned are in fact men, but men in their relations, their links, their imbrication with those things" that surround and define them: wealth and resources, customs and habits, accidents and misfortunes.[27] If sovereignty is the administration of territory, government is the disposing of such things. But even a cursory

glance at the woodcut of Hobbes's leviathan or a consideration of Foucault's own claim that the sovereign makes die will suggest that sovereignty, too, is not only a disposing and organizing of things, including people; it is a particular relation of forces and is itself inscribed into the microphysical diagram of things. Sovereignty is the habitation of those things of which government disposes. What governmentality and sovereignty share, then, is a rootedness in a realm of things. That such a realm is thought to require any form of disposing at all should alert us, however, to the way it threatens to stray from the codes and norms of an imposed economy. Sovereignty and governmentality are both engrossed in the life of things; but since the lives of those things are given over to an energy of passing, an energy of crisis, then it follows that both governmentality and sovereignty, each of which is dependent on the destiny of things, are in turn given over to the force that drives the passing of things (to the point that even prior forms of governmentality and sovereignty become things). Theorists of governmentality tell us to forget sovereignty. Theorists of sovereignty counter that government and sovereignty have always been fused. Our aim is to work through both of those categories in order to touch upon the realm of ungovernable things that persists in each. As we see it, the challenge for the critic is to push beyond twinned fantasies—the fantasy, on the one hand, of an efficacious sovereign who paradoxically ensures our freedom to critique him and, on the other, the fantasy that there could ever be mastery without a master—and instead restore to the position of sovereign function a ruined, eternally perishing sovereign, an impossible master. Critique must ground the sovereign in a particular form of crisis, one rooted in that continuous perishing of social formations and things through which otherwise imperceptible forces in history assert themselves. Those unseen forces—political, yet positively nonexistent in either time or space; neither a simple negating of politics nor a positive affirmation of it but a canceled trace within the political; taciturn and sedimentary, reverberating in politics without being fully acknowledged or articulated—go by various names in this collection: *apoikos*, flesh, the infrapolitical, the impolitical. Following Marx and the Frankfurt School, we choose to call the historical form of those transient forces *natural history*. For it is natural history that, as we shall go on to argue in our own contribution to *Sovereignty in Ruins*, dissolves not only the link cementing the political subject to S_1 and S_2 but also the link cementing sovereignty to the economy. Marx, contemplating the creative destruction practiced by the bourgeoisie, marveled at how "all that is solid melts into air."[28] Natural history does

something similar, but in a different element. The solid bond between the juridical and economic rationalities held in place by the sovereign, natural history grinds into dust.

Notes

1 In the last paragraph of his "Postface" to the second edition of *Capital*, Marx alludes to just such a "universal" or "general crisis," a crisis measurable by the "universality of its field of action and the intensity of its impact." Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 103.

2 Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, 127: "The eventual solution is uncertain, but the end of the crisis, a change in the existing situation—threatening, feared and eagerly anticipated—is not. The question of the historical future is inherent in the crisis."

3 Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*, 43.

4 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 297.

5 Meta-, para-, imp-, infra-, bio-, ecopolitics, and so on.

6 Koselleck, "Crisis," 359.

7 Our thinking here is indebted to Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, esp. 62–69.

8 Thinkers of biopolitics such as Nikolas Rose, Bruce Braun, Paolo Virno, and Antonio Negri proceed from the common assumption that the workings of a dark, fearful biopolitical capitalism necessarily generate its obverse, an affirmative potential in which the mobility and flux of molecular life are the direct expression of an enormous productive power inherent in capitalism and are also capable of overthrowing it. The limitation of such a premise, as we see it, is that it cannot do much more than recognize dread, albeit with the added hope that within that dread there lies the potential for recombination—that dread is "radically open, full of surprises and unexpected forms." Taking the world as it is, these thinkers try to turn it further, in the direction of something like communist capitalism. Dread, they seem to believe, can be turned to our advantage in the production of a biopolitical commons. Unfortunately, this full extension of the affective register does not fundamentality sever its connection to the productivity paradigm. The similarity between biocapitalism and an affirmative biopolitics remains too great; rather than working through the distinctions, these thinkers make those distinctions indistinguishable. See, for example, Braun's "Biopolitics and the Molecularization of Life," esp. 17–18, in which the author tries to work through the fear and dread that biocapitalist rhetoric exploits but that can also be used to articulate "the virtuality of molecular life" (18).

9 See Adorno's formula #34, "Johnny-Head-in-Air," in *Minima Moralia*: "The almost insoluble task is to let neither the power of others, nor your own powerlessness, stupefy us" (57).

10 Foucault, "For an Ethic of Discomfort," 444.
11 Foucault, "For an Ethic of Discomfort," 444.
12 Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 301. But see Negri, *Time for Revolution*, as well: "It is well established that the entire history of the bourgeoisie is nothing other than the permanent attempt to live through crisis, that crisis is linked to the definition of the bourgeoisie itself. Even to say 'the market' is, in a way, to say crisis. But it is also well known that the bourgeoisie makes crisis the key to the progress of capital, and so succeeds in its project to organize productive time and to exert its dominion over crisis" (54).
13 Virno, *Multitude*, 152–53.
14 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 48.
15 See Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 171.
16 Agamben, "Form-of-Life," 155.
17 This is an irony neatly captured by Eve Sedgwick, who observes that the codification of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, has only ended up "propagating the repressive hypothesis ever more broadly by means of displacement, multiplication and hypostatization," a situation that Sedgwick likens to a feedback loop wherein every attempt at stepping outside the repressive hypothesis necessarily leads to the continuing rigorous study of its protean inclusivity. Looking beyond a sovereign function that has become curiously attenuated and yet also all powerful and inescapable, Sedgwick allows us to see how ideology critique itself has lent a prosthetic afterlife not only to a concept of politics as necessarily activist and emancipatory—that is, as necessarily inseparable from the sovereign function whose workings it brings to light and whose place it might, in the interests of putting an end to itself, assume—but also to the sovereign function, which ideology critique repeatedly propped up for no other reason than to once again demystify it. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 9–12.
18 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 88–89.
19 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 88.
20 For Foucault, a dispositif designates a dominant strategic function that intervenes into forces of relations in order to direct and stabilize them, to manipulate them so they can be assembled into an integrated apparatus or network that draws the most heterogeneous elements—institutions, statements, discourses—into its force field, supported by the power/knowledge nexus. Its networking power has the extraordinary capacity, Agamben adds, "to manage, govern, control, and orient—in a way that purports to be useful—the behaviors gestures, and thoughts of human beings." Agamben, "What Is an Apparatus?," 12, and Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 194–96. Roberto Esposito makes a similar point when he suggests that "sovereignty effectively proved to be the first and fundamental immunitarian dispositif, together with the categories, preventatively immunized, of property and liberty." See his "Community, Immunity, Biopolitics," 8.
21 Foucault, "Governmentality," 218.

22 This is true even with respect to what Pheng Cheah calls the "more universal, higher sovereignty" of the modern subject and its "inalienable rights." Whether the self-determining sovereign subject produces with other such sovereign subjects a government of popular sovereignty or collaborates for its image or protection with a premodern sovereign, that subject nevertheless makes a compact with sovereignty whereby the most diverse multiples can still speak "as if by one mind," as Spinoza puts it. This mutual interdependence of sovereign subject and state sovereignty demonstrates how thoroughly the individual subject remains primordially invested in the figure of the sovereign. See Pheng Cheah, "Second Generation Rights as Biopolitical Rights."

23 As Derrida says of the French Revolution's failure to revolutionize sovereignty: "It is not interrupted, and at the death of the king one can still say: 'The King is dead, long live the King!' One has simply changed sovereigns. The sovereignty of the people or of the nation merely inaugurates a new form of the same fundamental structure. The walls are destroyed, but the architectural model is not deconstructed—and will, as you will see, continue to serve as a model and even as an international model." Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, 282.

24 See Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 276–82.

25 Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 207.

26 See Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," 597.

27 Foucault, "Governmentality," 208–9.

28 Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 476.