

# Cruel Festivals: Furio Jesi and the Critique of Political Autonomy

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**Abstract** This article evaluates Furio Jesi's conception of mythic violence, focusing in particular on his theory of revolt as a mode of collective experience qualitatively distinct from that of revolution. Jesi offers both a descriptive phenomenology of how uprisings alter the human experience of time and action, as well as a critique of the "autonomy" these moments afford their participants. In spite of their immense transformative power to interrupt historical time and generate alternate forms of collective subjectivation, the event-like structure of revolt also harbors within it a unique set of dangers. Such creative mutations risk trapping political actors within a relational logic of the exception, a "ban" structure that, although distinct from the atomization that governs normal time, ultimately works to reinforce it in the long run. The article concludes by suggesting that Jesi's late concept of the "cruel festival" offers a troubling premonition of our current era, in which revolts proliferate in the absence of any ideological horizon of revolution.

(They cannot grasp one another who  
lived together in remembrance.)

—Friedrich Hölderlin<sup>1</sup>

With the publication in 2014 of Furio Jesi's *Spartakus: the Symbology of Revolt*, to be followed later this year by *Secret Germany* and *Time and Festivity*, Anglophone readers are now in a better position to appreciate the breadth and complexity of one of the most luminous and penetrating theoretical oeuvres of the Italian twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> A major theme in Jesi's work during the decade between 1968 and 1977 concerns the way in which not only the presence, but also the withdrawal of authentic mythic experience can obstruct liberatory social and political transformation. It is only an apparent paradox that in a post-mythological age, wherein the metaphysical and cultural premises of festive collectivity are lacking, mythic violence does not disappear but instead reasserts itself in negative forms. In what follows, I argue that Jesi's conception of the "cruel festival" represents the culmination of a protracted reflection upon some of the major themes of twentieth century

political philosophy, challenging our understanding of the emergence of political subjectivity, the nature of revolution, and the significance of violence therein. This article aims to do two things. My main objective will be to present a reading of the critique of political violence in *Spartakus*, paying particular attention to the logical categories that link politics to myth, and which form the basis of his original account of insurrectional subjectivation.<sup>3</sup> In the final section, I will suggest that Jesi's way of tethering the problems of revolt and revolution to the question of festivity in the 1970s allows his account to respond to the paradoxes of political transformation in our current era, marked as it is by the exhaustion of the twentieth century's revolutionary imaginary. The red thread of this reflection, I argue, consists in a critique of political autonomy. The "autonomy" at issue in Jesi's account of revolt is complex, merging several senses of the term: here, *ethical* autonomy (acts committed for their own sake, carrying their legitimacy immanently within them) overlaps with *political* autonomy (spontaneous collective action emerging outside of all formal and representative institutions such as unions or political parties), both of which prove to be dependent upon the relative *temporal* autonomy of the event from history. Autonomy appears less as a completed state of being or action that we either exhibit or not, than a simultaneously political and phenomenological dynamism with its own specific undertow, introducing real effects in human affairs in spite of its ultimately relative or even illusory nature. Notwithstanding its immense transformative power to suspend historical time and generate alternate forms of collective subjectivation, the autonomizing effects of revolt harbor a unique set of dangers. Such creative mutations risk trapping political actors within a logic of the exception, a "ban" structure that, although distinct from the atomization that governs normal time, ultimately works to reinforce it in the long run. As I seek to show, Jesi's analysis of revolt both confirms and deepens the link that Giorgio Agamben has since established between the logic of the exception and sacrifice, allowing us to identify the presence of the *arcanum imperii* not only within formations of state and economic power, but also within insurrectional sequences that set out precisely to topple them. Without abandoning the struggle for a truly autonomous, joyful, and expansive duration of common festive experience, the critique of political autonomy must nevertheless dispel the dangerous illusion that, in the negativity, violence, and grief of civil wars, riots, and climate disasters, the "true festival" already shines through.<sup>4</sup>

### The Project of *Spartakus*

In December of 1969, 50 years after the commencement of the German Revolution, self-taught Germanist, mythologist, and philosopher

Furio Jesi completed *Spartakus: The Symbology of Revolt*, a study of the role of myth in the 1919 "Spartacist revolt" in Berlin.<sup>5</sup> Like Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" (1921), itself published amidst the final throes of the failed revolution, *Spartakus* is an effort to work through the defeat of a mass uprising. A year earlier, when demonstrations at Nanterre and the Sorbonne escalated into barricades in the streets and a rapid-fire wave of wildcat factory takeovers, Jesi had traveled to Paris to participate in the May insurgency. At its height, two-thirds of the country would join in a nationwide general strike that brought the entire French economy to a halt. When the movement was finally routed back into parliamentary channels and "normal time" was restored, Jesi returned to Italy. As he neared the completion of *Spartakus*, his hometown of Turin became the epicenter of the "Hot Autumn" of 1969-70, a wave of strikes, occupations, riots, and bombings that spilled beyond the walls of the factories and universities, catalyzing a complex chain of social struggles that would rumble across the industrialized north of Italy throughout the 1970s.<sup>6</sup>

Situated between an uprising that failed and another sequence of struggle just gathering steam, *Spartakus* proposes that the failure to reckon in a sufficiently immanent way with the epiphanic character of insurrectional experience has elided the political and strategic significance of the event of "revolt." Since as early as Marx and Engels's polemics against Stirner and Bakunin, revolt has too often been maligned and overlooked by the revolutionary left, which has either marginalized and dismissed it, or subsumed it within wider causal and strategic dynamics to which it must be subordinated and contained.<sup>7</sup> Stripped of its inner political content by reactionaries seeking to reduce it to antisocial criminality, or condemned by historicists as a "mistaken," "harmful," and ultimately doomed deviation from long-term, gradual revolutionary strategy, the effort has rarely been made to understand it on its own terms, through what it immediately brings into being. *Spartakus* responds to this lacuna by elevating the phenomenon of revolt to the status of a determinate concept.

When we ask why this or that insurrection failed, the tendency is often to look to the constellation of causal forces within the given. This way of thinking is flawed: the fact is that whatever the circumstances may be, the time is *never* ripe. The reason lies neither exclusively in the socio-ideological consciousness of the masses or the vanguard, nor in the material circumstances that underwrite them, nor in the causal interchange between the two. Jesi insists on the inadequacy of explaining revolt through exclusively economic, ideological, or instinctual mechanisms. Not because these are unimportant, but rather because revolt brings about a mutation in the experience of time, choice, and meaning that no amount of planning or preparation can fully dampen or circumvent. The *event* of revolt has a determinate structure that must be

understood on its own terms, and it does no good to simply critique it from the outside. A critical understanding of revolutionary violence requires that we interpret its means and measures “internally.” It is not a matter of dismissing ideological or logistical considerations, but of grasping how the event slips, so to speak, “between” the plane of sense and that of bodies, reorganizing our perception of the real and its causal forces in ways that have a direct bearing upon how logistical and ballistic movements play out on the ground.

### Revolution and Historical Time

Jesi positions the grammar and temporality of “revolution” within the secularized eschatology of historicist Marxism. According to this view, history appears as the development of a contradictory whole in a complex yet ultimately linear temporal schema. Revolution is a “strategic complex of insurrectional movements, coordinated and oriented over the mid-to-long term towards ultimate objectives,” a “conscious wanting to alter *in historical time* a political, social, economic situation,” in which plans are made by “constantly considering the relations between cause and effect in historical time, within the most far-seeing perspective possible.”<sup>8</sup> “Revolution” in this sense refers less to a discreet event than “a political orientation, and the philosophy of history that corresponds to it,” an orientation that sees this or that revolution (*cum* discreet occurrence) as the ultimately inevitable outcome of an internal dialectic between reciprocally constituent powers or terms. The revolutionist approaches the present situation like a player seeking to advance her position on a unitary game board, where the dynamism of the game is rooted in the internal laws of interaction between its pieces. As an empirical event or outcome, revolution therefore appears as the *function* of a “fated correspondence” between the economic laws of capitalist development and the struggles of the dispossessed proletariat.<sup>9</sup> If materialism requires that socialism should “*in all its facets* have its premises in capitalism,” and if the progressive proletarianization and pauperization resulting from the expanded reproduction of capitalist relations of production across the globe also necessitates the emergence of an increasingly more disciplined, concentrated, and organized labor force, the whole process should (presumably) be accompanied by growing resistance among the organized proletariat. Since we are dealing with an internal dialectic, the advance of one term (Capital) cannot take place without an inevitable accentuation of the contradictions that comprise the internal relations of the objective totality. Certainly, setbacks and defeats may occur along the way, but the complex of upheavals and reaction plays out within a dialectical totality the development of which remains an “inalterable and unstoppable process.”<sup>10</sup>

What is to be done? From the perspective of revolution, political strategy consists in the “correct” interpretation and description of our actual socio-economic configuration of forces in light of their position within a long-term development of the consciousness and organizational capacity of the proletariat. In short, we must study (the *signs* of) the present, with a view to the gradual preparation (of the forces *signified*) for the clash to come. For the militant engaged in a strategic assessment, the present appears as an instrumental nexus of causal signifiers, mappable in principle, if not always in fact. Whence the permanent temptation of scientism as a theoretical bulwark against ideological distortion and tactical myopia (the need to believe, as Foucault put it, in “signs that exist primarily, originally, actually, as coherent, pertinent, and systematic marks”); whence also the centrality, for militants like Luxemburg, of propaganda as a tool for educating and radicalizing the masses, who must “consciously accept the views, the goals, and the methods of the Spartacus League” prior to revolt breaking out, if the latter is to produce a desirable strategic outcome.<sup>11</sup>

While it may regard revolt as a necessary moment within the long term development of the contradictions of history, the perspective of revolution implies an instrumental relationship to it, considering it principally with respect to its causal outcomes. This unwillingness to reckon with the nature of revolt on its own terms, in its distinction from revolutionary temporality, represents a stumbling block for revolutionary politics. The difference in question is not reducible to the level of explicitly sought *ends*, since both revolt and revolution might try either to seize or to depose power. It hangs instead on a mutation that revolt introduces into the very shape of experience. Whereas its mid- to long-term strategic horizon ensures that the perspective of revolution is “immersed *in* historical time,” revolt is a “sudden insurrectional explosion” that suspends historical time.<sup>12</sup> While we might attempt to account for revolt within a strategic horizon, its own internal mode of existence eschews long-distance calculations and preparations, placing history itself in parentheses. The suspension at issue in revolt affects not only time, but touches on four additional overlapping registers, altering the sensitivity to signs and symbols (perception), the inhabitation of space (the body), the character of decisional action (the will), and the relation between the individual, the collective, and the Party (group subjectivation).

### **The Perceptual Machine of Revolt**

In his memoir of the German Revolution, the former-Spartacist and KPD militant Karl Retzlaw paints a picture of the disorganized and spontaneous experience that initiated the January rebellion:

When the people of Berlin got to know about the planned dismissal of Eichhorn, several hundred thousand spontaneously gathered at Alexanderplatz to express their solidarity with him. The day was Sunday, January 6, 1919. I was one of the people there. I joined a big crowd heading to Alexanderplatz together with other members of my youth education association. The crowd grew consistently as we approached the square. Outside police headquarters, Eichhorn and USPD leaders spoke to the masses. Everyone mentioned the particularly scandalous slander by the *Vorwärts*. When the speeches were over, chants of "Go to the *Vorwärts*!" rang out. These were echoed by thousands. Immediately, a crowd of several thousand men formed, me included. We got on our way. At the entrance to the *Vorwärts* offices there was a short scuffle with some security guards, but they had no means to stop us. We occupied the building and the security guards were sent home together with the employees. No guns had been used, no one had been killed. In the building, we found a selection of light and heavy weaponry, from handguns to mortars. No one will ever know who started the "Go to the *Vorwärts*!" chants. There have been many theories about possible *agents provocateurs*. This is a possibility. But it might as well have been a protestor excited by the moment and the enormous crowd. This is how spontaneous mass actions emerge: someone puts a sentiment into words that everyone is feeling. This is what happens in agitated times.<sup>13</sup>

After the occupation of the *Vorwärts* office, which was "neither planned nor organized," thousands of workers spread out across the *Zeitungsviertel* [the printing neighborhood], occupying strategic positions. None of this took place under the direction of Luxemburg, Liebknecht, or others on the revolutionary committee, which "never did anything other than [declare] the Ebert government unlawful. Then it dissolved" (*ibid.*).

While it is of course true to observe that revolts have a spontaneous, experimental, and groping character, in no way resembling the realization of a pre-existing plan, this does not really touch on the essential. On the one hand, it verges on a platitude: as Retzlaw himself observes, "no revolutionary force in history has followed a laid-out path, assessing its power calmly and carefully every step of the way. In the beginning, no one knows where the limits of power are."<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the notion of spontaneity is both too voluntaristic and not enough, as it fails to capture the event-like transformation of the will itself, its character of immediate sufficiency.

What characterizes a political will in the absence of a plan? The thesis of *Spartakus* is that the eruption of an insurrection effects a *symbolic* transformation formally analogous to mythic epiphany, and which imposes an experience of presence with four distinct phenomenological traits, each of which must be unpacked: it is "objective, collective, exhaustive, [and] exclusive."<sup>15</sup>

Jesi's point of departure lies in an empirical observation, one confirmed by Retzlaw's account (among others): it is characteristic of uprisings that only a small fraction of their total participants ever possess a global perspective on their ultimate strategic significance, their concrete position within the long-term chain of historical causality. As a result, "the greater part of those who take part in a revolt choose to commit their individuality to an action whose consequences they can neither know nor predict."<sup>16</sup> In the moment of battle—and "every revolt is a battle"—there is a suspension of instrumental-ideological *significations* (e.g., of Marxism as a dogma, science, or referential schema of historico-political interpretation), in the place of which a *symbolic* polarization of the field of perception takes hold.<sup>17</sup> As Jesi writes, "the clash of the revolt distills the symbolic components of the ideology that has put the strategy in motion, and *only these are truly perceived* by the combatants."<sup>18</sup> This remark deserved to be emphasized, as it points to a quite specific mutation that the "event" of revolt induces in the perception of its participants.

Jesi's reliance on categories drawn from the symbolist school of mythology is a key factor marking his account of political subjectivation off from other competing notions.<sup>19</sup> For instance, it is certainly correct to observe, as Rancière does, that perception always implies a way of "dividing up the world and people," one that "separates and excludes" at the same time as it "allows participation."<sup>20</sup> As we shall see, revolt does indeed crystallize a shared horizon of partisan experience, generating a distinctive configuration of the "common." To say this does not, however, tell us about the *mode* in which what has become sharable appears, which is decisive for understanding the political stakes of the rupture, and the durability of the experience of community it affords. Revolt may or may not introduce what Rancière refers to as a new "distribution the sensible"—a new dispensation of roles, functions, places, identities, etc. What counts, however, is not merely *what* becomes visible or audible, but *how*, i.e., in what register? How do places, objects, and people come to appear to those who have decided to take up the fight? For Jesi, it is a transposition in the regime of meaning from sign to symbol, from the ideological to the epiphanic, that gives revolt a phenomenological pattern distinct from other political sequences. If there is a new distribution of the sensible in revolt, it is this "distillation" that forms its immobile motor.

What does it mean to "perceive" an ideology symbolically? Whereas it belongs to the nature of the sign to be anchored analogically or diacritically within a referential system, what characterizes the mythic symbol is its peculiar capacity to stand on its own, to constitute a quasi-objective presence unto itself, to be "self-interpretive," "resting in itself." The mythic symbol tightly adheres to the matter of its expression, making it possible to say (with Jean-Pierre Vernant) that it "*is what*

it symbolizes."<sup>21</sup> This does not necessarily mean that we encounter the "essence" or substance of Myth *per se* in the mythic symbol; it simply means that the effects it generates cling to the particularity of the matter in which they are inscribed.<sup>22</sup> Epiphany may be defined as a shift in our relation to the given that symbolizes our perception of existence, of ourselves, and of others. Revolt confers on objects and persons the gravity of a symbolic truth, a "true" and "real" character that tightly embeds each of them within an active and dynamically lived polarization (friends vs. enemies) that circumscribes the entire field of perception in a paradoxically "self-contained" manner. In such moments, Jesi writes, "the adversary of the moment truly becomes *the enemy*, the rifle or club or bicycle chain truly becomes *the weapon*, the victory of the moment – be it partial or total – truly becomes, in and of itself, *a just and good act* for the defense of freedom, the defense of one's class, the hegemony of one's class."<sup>23</sup> The weapon one wields becomes not only adequate to its situation, it *exhaustively* and *exclusively* belongs to the battle, merging completely with its position in "the battle," without remainder. This symbolization-effect wraps the entirety of the perceptual environment into its polarizing mesh, conferring on all that it touches the effect of being at once eternal and immediate.

What allows the symbol to confer this new consistency upon experience? What gives revolt this unifying or syncopating power? If the symbol crystallizes ideologies, and confers a quasi-absolute character on objects, persons, and choices, this is because its ultimate nature is *temporal*.

## Symbol and Event

Epiphany is not a metaphysical flight from this world into a transcendent or supernatural beyond; its effects are registered entirely in this world, within the givenness of earthly life. The difficulty lies in explaining how it is that the declension of the given suddenly assumes the mode of a double-temporality, a conjunctive series straddling two levels or modes of synthesis. Everything takes place *as if* the natural (or historical) series of successive human time were intersected diagonally by a pure past. How is the mythic symbol able to confer a sort of quasi-eternity on earthly events, to impose upon natural time a different type of formal coherence and necessity, grouping the things we see and do within a new order and totality?

The subversive eruption of symbolic time within history can be clarified by an analogy with the role of ancient Greek tragedy. In the study of tragic drama, a *daimon* refers to a divine force that transects the tragic hero, a supernatural *mania* imposing a terrible necessity upon human endeavors. The entry of such extra-human forces into the sphere of human action announces a previously unseen necessity

between past, present and future, introducing a destinal order within the dramatic succession of events. As Vernant describes it,

The moment Agamemnon sets foot on the carpet the drama reaches its consummation. And even if the play is not quite over, it can introduce nothing that is not already accomplished once and for all. The past, the present, and the future have fused together with a single meaning that is revealed and encapsulated in the symbolism of this action of impious hubris. [...] At this culminating point of the tragedy, where all the threads are tied together, the time of the gods invades the stage and becomes manifest within the time of men.<sup>24</sup>

The time of coexistence arrives with the shattering force of an *event*, the defining feature of which is the power to impose a new relation between empirically-lived present moments. Gathered under the symbol, or within its vicinity, gestures now assume a new significance vis-à-vis one another, “sheltered” (as Jesi will put it) by the new distributive totality: *this* bicycle chain becomes “*the* weapon” by virtue of becoming a symbolic component of “*the* battle,” an event that never itself has the empirical status of an object or a sense datum. What characterizes this formal order and totality?

In his meditations on Sophocles’s Thebean tragedies, Hölderlin draws attention to a distinctive feature of events: at a certain moment in the course of the drama, the natural time of the responsible human agent is thrown out of joint, dislocated. The interruption of divine time coincides with the overthrow of cardinal time (1, 2, 3...) by an ordinal distribution (1st...2nd; or “before / after”). For Hölderlin, the essential structure of tragic drama resides in this inaugural rupture or *caesura* that purifies itself of the progressive rhythm of intentional human life.<sup>25</sup> An event is therefore not the same thing an occurrence, it is not something that happens *at* this or that present moment. We know we are dealing with an event, when the natural or empirical interrelation of discrete present moments suddenly becomes wrenched apart, such that a new formal order of communication now obtains between them. An event doesn’t take place “in” time; it is a caesura that happens *to* time. Present moments are split apart by a “counter-rhythmic rupture” that arrays them on either side of a dividing line; the event is this line, around which time now reshuffles its inner connection to itself. Henceforth, factual presents must now relate according to their relative position *before* or *after* the event. It is in this sense that the caesura can be said to impose upon the experience of time a “pure order”: pure, because the relation between future and past is no longer derived from, nor dependent upon, the dynamic movements of empirical succession, instead becoming “fixed and formal characteristics which follow a

*priori* from the order of time" — a static synthesis.<sup>26</sup> Events introduce a new order and totality within time: not only are the relations between past, present and future now arranged in an ordinal fashion, but every such ordering implies something like a relative totality, understood as the counter-rhythm of the event that now either draws them together or pulls them apart, and to which the series or sequence of moments as a whole belongs.

The decisive point is this: it is precisely because this event that breaks apart and regroups present moments within its totality *does not* itself "take place" in a concrete empirical present, that the destiny and necessity it introduces into human action can only present itself as a *symbol*. If the experience of mythic symbolization is essentially temporalizing, this is because it is in the nature of the symbol to envelop within itself a paradoxical simultaneity of before, during, and after, as valences or a distinct perspectives through which the meaning of an act may be lived by the actor. The symbol of an act folds the time of the whole drama into itself, such that this or that particular gesture is suddenly invested with the full magnitude of the encompassing event.

Of course, the Spartacist revolt was not a "poetic operation" but a "clash between classes, with all the social political, economic, psychological and military features proper to such a clash."<sup>27</sup> However, here too we find "exceptional features which... confer upon it especially symbolic qualities [that position it] at the intersection between mythical time and historical time, *eternal return* and *once and for all*."<sup>28</sup> When the revolt kicked off the first week of January, 1919, an atypical time was suddenly instituted. If we listen closely to how Jesi describes this time, the counter-rhythmic rupture of a caesura becomes recognizable: "every revolt is circumscribed by precise borders in historical time and historical space. *Before it and after it* lie the no-man's-land and duration of each and everyone's lives in which uninterrupted individual battles are fought."<sup>29</sup> If the insurrectional suspension of time is not a magic spell but rather the "only waking state," if it is "only in destruction [that] time is both suspended and truly passing," its "woke" character is indexed not to a Cartesian opposition between clarity and obscurity (a criterion of knowledge), but to the symbolic mesh that now groups gestures, objects, and decisions around the event of *the* battle. While the slumber of normal or historical time is marked by the natural or dynamic concatenation of successive instants, in revolt perception suddenly becomes walled-in or enclosed by the pure difference of life before-the-event and its still uncertain outcome, a "stilled" or static time. The inner secret of the revolt-event resides in this *ex-ceptio* by which it exteriorizes normal or historical time.

Jesi's theory is that the new totality into which the event of revolt gathers and orders the relations of past and future has the effect of amplifying and intensifying certain phenomenological features of

experience, while relegating others to a “no-man’s land.” Revolt simultaneously activates and decommissions us, conferring a distinctive kind of urgency and immediacy upon choice and action, while at the same time placing those problems and questions belonging to the horizon of historical time temporarily beyond our grasp. This reciprocal exteriority of revolt from revolution, which does not so much release us from history as it does *mute* it, forms the root of what I will refer to below as the “insurrectional ban.”

### The Decisional Commune

Mutations of time and perception have a decisive impact on what transpires in social upheavals, for they orient and facilitate the specific forms of group subjectivation that populate and drive them. If it is correct to ascribe a form of “autonomy” to the community of struggle born in revolt, this is due not only to its tendency to destitute constituted political powers (the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD), but *also* the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (KPD)), but to the peculiar way in which it invests the ethical moment of personal commitment with shared affective contours and vital stakes. Although Jesi does not give any particular name to this mode of collective coexistence, given his emphasis on the link between free choice and the formation of a common perception, I will refer to it as a “decisional commune,” the latter term being understood here as a qualitative bond or a way of *being-in-the-world* premised on facing the situation together with others.<sup>30</sup> While many forms of decisional collectivities can and do exist, what distinguishes that of revolt is the fact of its being calibrated directly and uniquely to the symbolic space and rhythm of “*the battle*.” The aim of this section and the one that follows will be twofold: first, to recover its salient phenomenological features, and second, to show how they fit within Jesi’s critique of political autonomy.

When the preparatory and intermediate time of historical progression becomes decommissioned, actions take on the “autonomous” quality of deeds undertaken for their own sake, whose justification or “law” is expressed within their own elaboration. With the extrinsic relation between means and ends suppressed, the center of gravity shifts inside of the act itself: “everything that is done has a value in itself, independently of its consequences and its relations within the transitory or perennial complex that constitutes history.”<sup>31</sup> “Success” now becomes subject to a different type of ethical test. The criterion for parsing the adequacy or inadequacy of an act during revolt becomes “internal” rather than consequentialist: all irrevocable and decisive choices are felt as “in agreement with time,” whereas every moment of waiting or hesitation places one outside of it.<sup>32</sup> What counts is no longer the chain of strategic causality from which this struggle emerged, or

toward which it is headed, but the syncopation between actor and situation, the concord or continuity between our symbolic perception of the situation and the elaboration of gestures appropriate to it. This ethical syncopation has three simultaneous aspects to it, altering the experience of decision, sociality, and space.

Revolt expands the symbolic life normally confined to private space in an outward way, conferring on the space of the city the character of a participable, immediately recognizable collective truth. As Andrea Cavalletti observes, it is a question of an “inner space [that] is revealed in the space of the city”<sup>33</sup> at the moment the *stasis* of the battle expands the circumscribed psychic world of the *oikos* into a space of collective shared life. Here it is worth quoting Jesi at length:

Every revolt is a battle, but a battle in which one has deliberately chosen to participate. The instant of revolt determines one’s sudden self-realization and self-objectification as part of a collectivity. The battle between good and evil, between survival and death, between success and failure, in which everyone is individually involved each and every day, is identified with the battle of the whole collectivity—everyone has the same weapons, everyone faces the same obstacles, the same enemy. Everyone experiences the epiphany of the same symbols—everyone’s individual space, dominated by one’s personal symbols, by the shelter from historical time that everyone enjoys in their individual symbology and mythology, expands, becoming the symbolic space common to an entire collective, the shelter from historical time in which the collective finds safety. [...] You can love a city, you can recognize its houses and its streets in your remotest or dearest memories; but only in the hour of revolt is the city really felt as your *own* city—your own because it belongs to the I but at the same time to the “others”; your own because it is a battlefield that you have chosen and the collectivity too has chosen...<sup>34</sup>

While there is nothing particularly surprising in the idea that a battle can generate a field of truth capable of cementing a feeling of collective purpose, the relation between individual decision and group identity in revolt is arguably a special case. Group subjectivization here proceeds without the mediation of an institutional or professional framework (e.g. military conscription, with its associated division of labor and command), emerging instead through a free decision that persists even after our immersion or “objectification” in the new collective arrangement. The danger associated with revolt’s decisional commune is therefore not that of a herd mentality or groupthink, for the crystallization of the collective does not signify a form of passivity or obedience for the individual. The difference between collective and private life here is indeed a modal one; however, the opposition is not between active and passive, but rather between two forms of activity or choice.

For Jesi, private individuality is not indexed to the exercise of voluntary choice *per se*, but to a specific mode of decision-making. For example, when a revolt fails and normal time is restored by force, if “historical time is not further suspended in circumstances and for reasons that may even differ from those of the revolt” then “everyone goes back to being an individual,” which implies that “every happening is once again evaluated on the basis of its presumed or certain consequences.”<sup>35</sup> As this passage makes clear, it is not the fact of choosing, but the *form* of the choice that distinguishes the individual battle of private life from the collective one. Not only would it be absurd to deny that participation in a revolt is on some level an individual choice, for Jesi it is the free existential choice *par excellence*: “in revolt, every man is engaged by his free choice”; whether or not the revolt was genuinely spontaneous, or induced by provocateurs prematurely, “the rebel still retains that free choice to err towards which Dostoevsky directed all of his love-hatred.”<sup>36</sup> The difference is that *what* I decide upon is not exclusive to me: it is my position within a polarization that is irreducibly bound up with a collective world, a shared horizon of the important and unimportant, the interesting and the uninteresting, etc. *To decide upon the symbol is to decide upon a horizon of choice that is inherently collective.* The self-realization at issue in the appropriation of the city is hatched from the experience of a *shared perception*, a sensible attachment and attunement to a situation animated by collectively-felt dangers and problems (“the same weapons...the same obstacles...”). Consequently, it is not the “individual” who appropriates the city unilaterally in a revolt. To experience a shared epiphany of symbols is to “belong to what the symbol expresses,” i.e., to deduce one’s *self* from the collective meaning symbolized therein, to feel intimately claimed by it: “I *am* a communist at the moment I decide which side I am on in this battle,” a battle that inherently outstrips the “I,” having a quasi-objectivity all its own. The decision to wield *the* weapon, to defend the space held open on this side of the barricade, positions us within one of the groups of contenders between which the situation is polarized. That the city is felt as both “your own” *and* as belonging to “the others” means that the choice we make remains individual, but the dimension of our “self” that we stake upon the symbolic matrix of the battle is not the same one who slept in their private bed the night before, for it emerges only here, in and through the assumption of this collective risk. The caesura, in other words, passes not only between the “inner space” of the event and the historical time bordering it at its edges, but also through ourselves.

As it divides private life from collective self-objectification, the caesura of revolt also traces a third type of line, demarcating the decisional commune from constituted political organizations and conferring a new significance on the friend-enemy distinction.

There is “a basic contradiction between party and revolt.”<sup>37</sup> During normal time, the function of the proletarian political Party is to bridge the gulf between individuals and the collective subject of the class, permitting a strategic organization of partisan forces in view of the long-term revolutionary clash. When this gulf becomes hot-wired by the decisional commune of revolt, the party suddenly finds itself confronted with the competing objectivity of *the* battle, and loses its anchoring horizon of significance. What is at issue is not a contradiction between two different groupings of people, but between two “intrinsically autonomous” modes of group existence, each with its own values, one of which finds itself excluded by the caesura of the event, the other inhering only by virtue of its “shelter”:

*Parties and unions are driven back by the revolt into the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of the revolt itself...[O]nce the revolt begins they become simple instruments to guarantee the operative affirmation of values that are not the values of the party and the union but only the intrinsic value of the revolt.*<sup>38</sup>

On the one hand, the revolt of 1919 was unquestionably a proletarian insurgency organized around a class antagonism. Given the autonomy (*vis-à-vis* the party leadership) of the collectivity organized around the symbolic horizon of the event, we might be tempted to read Jesi as claiming that insurrection is essentially an extension of a “wildcat” tendency within labor movements. Certainly, May of 1968 in France took on such a character at various points. However, beneath the organizational problem of whether workers wait for clearance from union or Party higher-ups before engaging the class enemy (a matter that can be quickly corralled into ideological-strategic debates) there is an existential mutation playing itself out at a different, sensible level. Revolt, on Jesi’s view, is never undertaken exclusively as a strategic consideration, nor is it fully reducible to a matter of class-consciousness or political-economic grievances, but is, on some essential level, chosen for its own sake:

Participation in revolt is determined by the choice of an action closed in on itself, which *from outside* can be seen as inserted in a strategic context, but *from inside* appears as absolutely autonomous, isolated, valid in itself, independently of its non-immediate consequences.<sup>39</sup>

An intimate scission therefore transects the will of the militant, who finds herself split between mutually exclusive modes of engagement: either she affirms the collective attachment of the event, and submits to its quickening walls, or she clings to her developmental strategic sobriety at the price of maintaining a distance from the revolt—a

sobriety which, it must be added, by assessing the outcomes of the revolt in a purely “external” fashion, cannot avoid “instrumentalizing” the rebel actors, whose actions are “capitalized upon and employed by those for whom the revolt was a strategic choice.”<sup>40</sup>

### The Ruse of Symmetry

When freedom is practiced in a closed circle, it fades  
into a dream, becomes a mere image of itself.

—Guy Debord<sup>41</sup>

Jesi’s critique of political autonomy first surfaces in the context of an analysis of the relation between myth and counter-insurgency.

The inoperativity of both historical consciousness and the strategic apparatus of the political party exposes revolt to the risk of being leveraged or “technicized” by ruling powers. This danger leads Jesi to theorize an opportunistic mode of governance which, rather than trying to avert or quell disruption and rebellion, seeks instead to *induce* manageable crises so as to pilot them in directions strategically opportune for the restoration of “normal time.”<sup>42</sup> For a ruling order faced with a crisis of legitimacy and an uncertain future (as in the Germany of 1918), to allow the accumulated social tension to fester runs the risk of it assuming a spasmodic form, or worse, being transformed into organized revolutionary energy. It therefore becomes good policy to provoke its release through a temporary suspension of order under desirable circumstances. Under conditions of heightened social antagonism marked by widespread disaffection and class hatred, a premature insurrection can sometimes be the straightest line for the ruling class to re-solidify its dominance, which is anyway nothing other than the “bourgeois manipulation of time” ensuring the “calm endurance” of commodity society.<sup>43</sup> Appearances notwithstanding, crisis governance is not inherently opposed to insurrection, but only to revolution.

This recognition that our “masters... always need a suspension of normal time in order to organize their cruel maneuvers” offers a new critical vantage point from which to grasp the opposition between revolt and revolution, one that anticipates Jesi’s later concept of the “cruel festival” (more on this below).<sup>44</sup> Far from representing an authentically autonomous mode of communal life (a “true festival” surging forth in the midst of struggle), revolt now appears as one pole of a two-pronged apparatus that swings between “normal” (manipulated) and “suspended” (polarized) time, as between two uses of the exception available to the ruling order. In place of a naïve view of revolt as an intrinsically valuable “radical” derailing of normal temporality, Jesi now presents the *stasis* of 1919 as a bourgeois technicization aimed at

pushing the enemy bucking against its social order from within to the “outside” of history in order to neutralize it more expediently.<sup>45</sup>

Why is it so effective to push insurgents into the caesura of revolt? Jesi’s answer is that the distillation of ideological signs into symbols can create a strategic and ethical myopia affecting the very course of the battle itself. Although the limits represented by the temporality and social atomization of bourgeois society might be temporarily overcome, the symbolic face of bourgeois power often continues to radiate blindingly in our eyes. In every revolt there is a risk of relating to ourselves and one another through the symbolic structures of our adversary. Wherever they become “subject to the indisputable power of fascination exerted by their capitalist counterpart,” insurgents will “strive to counter it by transforming themselves into organs that are basically similar to those that characterize capitalism.”<sup>46</sup> This fascination directly impacts what takes place on the ground in political upheavals: once it is subjected to the epiphanic undertow of insurrectional symbolization, the selection of “targets” to be prioritized — ordinarily a strategic calculus — can easily wind up delineated “within the ambit of symbols and pseudo-myths” propagated by the bourgeoisie about itself, such that “the institutions of capitalism appear to the exploited as non-contingent symbols of power.”<sup>47</sup>

At the KPD congress on December 31st, 1918, Luxemburg cautioned her comrades against the illusion “that it is sufficient to overthrow the capitalist government and to set up another in its place in order to bring about a socialist revolution.”<sup>48</sup> For her, this meant not allowing the class antagonism to be circumscribed within the narrow confines of a change of “political” leadership. Yet, is it really the case that when the majority faction — those who no longer wished to “hear any nonsense about classical politics,” and whose “hostile shouts often interrupted the speeches of Luxemburg and Levi” — voted against participating in the elections, that this was due to a failure to distinguish bourgeois political revolutions from genuine social revolutions?<sup>49</sup> Arguably, the problem was not that they viewed the institutions of bourgeois power as the *terminus* of socialist power — they were councilists, after all. What is much more likely is that, having foreclosed upon the parliamentary tribune, to attack the *symbolic* citadels of the enemy’s power appeared to them as the sole means remaining to advance the social revolution. To eliminate the obstacles to the social revolution — the treacherous SPD, first of all — was precisely seen as the Party’s most urgent task. The alternative presented itself as a choice between “classical politics” and “direct battle,” such that, while wanting to destitute and expose the vacuity of parliamentary legitimacy and proceed toward genuine social transformation, they saw no other option than to confront the enemy ballistically. This slippage, especially once distilled into the quasi-objectivity of symbols, highlights the ambivalence

and danger of a *symmetrical* understanding of power: to perceive one's enemies as so many "heads to topple, symbols of power to conquer" leads to a "certainty that conquest of the *symbols of power*— especially the conquest of Berlin— would necessarily mean total victory."<sup>50</sup> In short, the symbolization of revolt always risks reifying the pseudo-objectivity of the enemy's mythic legitimacy, leading insurgents to waste their energy and resources destroying the empty symbolic citadels of its power, believing, "by a kind of non-contingent objectivity," them to be symbols of strength that must be "taken possession of in order to win the battle."<sup>51</sup>

The *ruse of symmetry* affects not only the targets of attack, i.e., insurgents' understanding of the basis on which the enemy's power rests, but also the "face of the enemy" against whom they believe they are struggling. Here one must return to the second of two temporal dimensions configured by the mythic symbol. If, as we saw above, the first aspect ("once and for all") described the immediacy of actions undertaken for their own sake, the latter ("eternal return") refers to the quasi-eternal dimension of the symbol, its capacity to appear as a "pure past." While the former is more directly responsible for suspending the historical-strategic temporality of the political party, it is the latter that allows us to account for the powerful sentiment of participating in an eternal truth (*the battle*). It will be recalled that the event's power to contract perception into a "now-time" is dependent upon its withdrawal from any *specific* present moment. This allows the symbol to roll up the various discreet moments of the battle into its relational mesh, with the result that gestures may now play out according to the fixed or static features of an apparently extra-temporal reality (*the battle*). The trouble is that, when the symbol becomes a site upon which a guilty or death-driven conscience is projected, its absolutizing tendency can lead to a dangerously moralistic erasure that numbs situational sensitivity.<sup>52</sup> Wherever mythic temporality takes over, Jesi warns, there is a permanent risk that the face of the enemy will pass from being a personification of "political and economic relations" (against which one ought to wage a "technical insurrection," targeting, perhaps, the material-infrastructural underpinnings of market society) into a kind of Manichæan moral terror in which the enemy suddenly appears as a "hideous," inhuman, and monstrous negativity to be vanquished *at all costs*.<sup>53</sup> When the *objective adequacy* of symbolic epiphany makes it such that one is no longer fighting *a* battle but *the* battle, no longer an enemy but *the* enemy ("the same enemy as ever"), a deadly sacrificial lure opens up:

The lethal spellbinding force of the capitalist symbols of power [generates a]... certainty that those symbols are in some (perhaps horrid and culpable) way an "apex," an epiphany of power; that

they must be countered by an epiphany of virtue if one wishes to acquire the same power. The monster reveals itself to be the holder of a power when its adversaries feel the need to counter it with the power of heroic virtue (that is, with the death of the hero).<sup>54</sup>

With the strategic horizon of perception transposed onto a plane of moral eternity, partisans suddenly find themselves transformed into sacrificial “heroes” who “dangerously underestimate the strength of the adversary,” hurling themselves into battle in a “concentrated expenditure of energies... that could almost be regarded as a spasmodic preparation for triumph or death.”<sup>55</sup>

Such a mythical and moralistic tone of sacrifice marked the rhetoric of the Berlin militants from the earliest moments through to the end. On the morning of January 7th, the first issue of *Vorwärts* (now published by the paper’s revolutionary occupiers) carried explicitly sacrificial overtones: “Workers! Comrades! Everyone out onto the streets! The Revolution is in danger! You must prove that you are ready to make sacrifices! Confirm what you have shown yesterday, namely that the entire proletariat of Great Berlin is willing to stand up and to fight for the revolution...”<sup>56</sup> The call, however, would not be answered by Berlin’s one million inhabitants, “almost all of whom remained passive.”<sup>57</sup> When government troops advanced on the building in the cover of darkness, Retzlaw recalls, “we realized to our dismay that the *Vorwärts* was not occupied by a disciplined fighting force,” and that any lingering hopes that “the workers of Berlin would come to our rescue” were, tragically, “all illusions.”<sup>58</sup>

Where the symbolization of perception merges with the Manichæan negativity of a “battle-against” — and “there is no revolt that is not essentially ‘Manichæan’” — what may have previously appeared as so many obstacles to the growth of our autonomous collective power now becomes the index of a demonically absolutized “evil” the destruction of which justifies every sacrifice.<sup>59</sup> The result is an inability to dissociate oneself from the suspended time of revolt that neutralizes our strategic awareness of the relativity and contingency of the clash, leaving us incapable of limiting our defeat. On Jesi’s view, it was precisely this “psychosis of revolt” that ultimately claimed Rosa Luxemburg’s life:

Luxemburg could not totally dissociate revolt from revolution. She could not totally dissociate the Spartacist revolt from her person [...] Like a spell, it placed before her — she who had been such an incisive investigator of the economic structure of capitalism — the adversary as a demonic enemy.<sup>60</sup>

In the end, the technicized myths propagated by bourgeois society about the “non-contingent” ground of its power defeat us not only by

reinforcing our timidity and docility, but by unconsciously inflating us with powers beyond our strength, by turning our own virtues against us, walling us into a closed world: a black bloc in a black box, unable to reckon materially and projectually with its historical conditions, and deprived, therefore, of the means for prolonging itself.

### The Insurrectional Ban

[The] capture of life in law is... precisely the condition of being included through an exclusion, of being in relation to something from which one is excluded or which one cannot fully assume.

—Giorgio Agamben<sup>61</sup>

If revolt “creates,” it does so first of all by rendering the presencing of the world *participable*. The decision to take sides and hurl ourselves into the battle suspends the reign of atomizing separations that compose the “normal time” of urban pacification, unleashing a shared epiphany that crystallizes itself in a collective use of the city oriented around the partisan confrontation with the enemy. At the same time (and herein lies the paradox), this participation is predicated on the symbol’s ability to transpose the meaning of our actions onto a plane of eternity that is itself impossible to fully assume or inhabit. The key to Jesi’s critique of political autonomy lies in grasping the internal relation between (i) the immersive *continuity* between self and world, thought and gesture, individual and collective, and (ii) the withdrawal or *discontinuity* of the symbols that condition it. The complexity of this critique resides in the fact that there is not one but two senses of autonomy in question, in a relation of inverse and reciprocal determination. The weakness of revolt stems from its being at once too-autonomous and not enough: the community it spawns depends upon a form of “empowering dissociation” from history that, at another level, precisely makes it impossible to dissociate oneself from the spell of the battle and the mythical face of the enemy.

The suspension of time induced by the perceptual machine of revolt has the form of an inclusive exclusion from history, a “ban relation” in Giorgio Agamben’s sense of the term.<sup>62</sup> Jesi’s analysis of revolt both confirms and deepens the link established by Agamben between the logic of the exception and sacrifice, allowing us to identify the presence of the *arcanum imperii* not only within formations of state and economic power, but also within insurrectional sequences that set out precisely to topple them.<sup>63</sup>

The presence of the ban relation in insurrectional sequences assumes the form of a single structure with two faces or “poles”: one that breaks time apart, the other that locks contestants into a relation

of symbolic symmetry. The decisional commune of revolt presupposes the activity of a caesura that works to wrench the temporalities of revolt and revolution apart, replacing the homogenous duration of history with the bifurcated temporality of the symbol (eternity *and* now, “eternal return” and “once and for all”). By breaking time into “two intrinsically autonomous realities,” by forcing the preparatory temporality of parties and unions into the “before” and “after” of the revolt, the event leaves in their place a collectivity unified only by “the flag of revolt.”<sup>64</sup> This *extrinsic autonomization* of time carries with it the inverse danger of *mimetic fascination*, leading insurgents to see themselves as the symmetrical opposite of their enemies in power, diverting them from the search for a genuinely autonomous vision of community and of happiness. The concept of the “insurrectional ban” aims to highlight the way in which these two pitfalls, that of *hyper-* and *hypo-*autonomization, merge and reinforce one another. The “fatalistic” inability to dissociate the vital stakes of a revolt from our personhood is the combined effect of a hyper-autonomization of temporal experience and a hypo-autonomization of our own idea of happiness and life (i.e., of our own power) from that of our enemies. By their power to wrench us “outside” of historical time, mythological symbols enclose the perceptual field of partisan action within the symmetrical image of an eternal battle (“the same obstacles... the *same enemy as ever*”<sup>65</sup>). The symbol’s power to suspend historical time rests on its capacity to *allude* to a pure past, to generate the emotional experience of a participation in eternity; it is precisely this subjectivizing experience of feeling *as if* our acts were indexed to an “elsewhere” that creates the optical illusion of fighting “the same enemy as ever.” The effect of this apparent exception from the course of history is to symbolically position our consciousness within a closed symmetrical field transforming this or that historically contingent clash into an emanation of “*the Battle*,” leading us to fight not in history but as if on the sacrificial plane of eternity. The insurrectional ban is defined by this simultaneous open-and-shut motion, whereby the “opening” of historical time onto an “outside” in fact serves to close perception anew within the narrow walls of mythical identification. It converts a historically contingent *rapport de force* into a “death rite that locks the circle shut.”<sup>66</sup> At issue is an early case study of what Jesi, beginning in the 1970s, will come to call the “mythological machine,” a gnoseological apparatus that functions to “keep myth constantly separate from history”<sup>67</sup> while leading us to believe that it “*comes to us from an “other” world.*”<sup>68</sup>

If the experience of freedom afforded by political upheavals cannot escape the closed circle of suspended time, the “waking state” they induce risks descending into a dream, trapping participants in a mythologically-inflated image of their own activity. The question, as David Lapoujade rightly observes, is how we can “avoid being car-

ried away by too much speed, by powers beyond our strength"?<sup>69</sup> Whether it consists in a *common site* of political-ideological legitimacy over which both sides contend (e.g., whenever we see ourselves as "legitimate" claimants to sovereign office) or a moral binary crystallized therefrom (heroes and monsters, good and evil), the trap in any case consists in the assumption of a *symbolic symmetry* between insurgent forces and the world against which they revolt. In response to this danger, *Spartakus* calls for a critique of the "representation of the enemy," i.e., a critique of the revolutionary mask of capitalist power.<sup>70</sup> The introduction of a genuine asymmetry into the relations of friend and enemy implies a break not simply with bourgeois values, but also with the narrow scope of "workerism" *per se*, which must cede its place to a struggle over divergent images of the human community itself.<sup>71</sup> If they are to avoid tumbling into the closed circle of the insurrectional ban, revolutionary struggles must find a way to orient themselves around an *other* plane of perception, another idea of happiness and of living than the one dictated by the reigning order. Only in this way will it be possible to neutralize or "demythologize" the conscious and unconscious grip of the enemy's mythic self-projection. The search for a genuinely autonomous premise for collective life therefore presupposes the capacity to exhibit the nullity and poverty of the enemy's projected image of itself. It is one thing to delegitimize this or that political enemy; it is something else to discredit the very image of life and of happiness on which its power rests—"their" evaluation of the important/unimportant, the alluring/repugnant, the interesting/uninteresting, etc., as distinct from our own. Struggles that fail to introduce an asymmetry of this sort at a collective level will only continue to invite the dangerous illusion that, in order to arrive at the conditions of genuine social transformation, "it is sufficient to overthrow the capitalist government and to set up another in its place."

### Cruel Festivals

What becomes of revolt in a "post-ideological" period such as ours, in which the political category of "class" no longer organizes the major upheavals of our time? While Jesi offers no conclusive answer to the question, his sustained meditations on the impossibility of the festival in the 1970s point in the direction of a response.

When revolts proliferate in the absence of any ideological horizon of revolution, the insurrectional ban does not disappear, but instead assumes the form of what he calls a "cruel festival," the "only *sui generis* 'festival' that remains to us."<sup>72</sup> This latter concept, developed in Jesi's late article, "Knowability of the Festival," describes the fate of the festival in a context deprived of the social conditions of genuine collectivity. The cruel festival is the "negative mold of what the 'fes-

tival' once was," a suspension of time "devoid of any metaphysical implications."<sup>73</sup> In an era in which the possibility of linking revolution to inherited mythological premises withdraws, the decisional commune becomes possible only under the sign of "violence and grief," in spite of whatever joys may be afforded by such moments. Whether these assume the form of climate disasters, or riots over lynchings or austerity, cruel festivals are marked by a familiar impossibility of crossing over into the duration of everyday life (what I have described above as the hyper-autonomization of time). However, since the forms of symbolic community they engender crystalize without any shared ideological program or identity, the *lieu commun* that binds their experience together depends upon the ambivalent negativity of an "othering" structure in order for their own premises to emerge in relief. Just as the ethnologist must plunge the savage into a state of "otherness" vis-à-vis his own civilization in order to develop a point of reference from which to grasp the boundaries of his own identity, the collectivity born in the cruel festival accomplishes the suspension of "normal time" only negatively, by plunging the enemy order from which it emerges into a periodic disorder. Politics becomes a process in which the insurgent must "plunge the *others* so as to use them for the purpose of rediscovering, through them, both solidarity with his peers and deliverance from solidarity with his own 'I'."<sup>74</sup> The essential trap of the festival in a post-mythological age lies in believing that the negativity, violence, and grief of civil wars and climate disasters harbors a truth that can allow us to simultaneously authenticate or "know" and to escape ourselves.<sup>75</sup> The cruel festival names a condition in which autonomy is won only through the "periodic suspension of 'having to be'" on the part of those "who do not have the full right to periodically suspend their 'having to be' since... they are part of 'civilization' and not 'savages.'"<sup>76</sup> It is for this reason that the eclipse of the twentieth century revolutionary imaginary exacerbates the danger of mimetic symmetry proper to the insurrectional ban, since participants in contemporary revolts are forced to draw the image of their "familiarity" with one another exclusively through the disorder introduced by the suspension of "normal time," without the holistic reconciliation of the collective symbology afforded by a prior ideological backdrop (Marxism as science, as dogma, etc.). In such a condition, the "I" flounders between the self it aims to strip away and the absence of a new positive consistency around which an "other" collective life could congeal. Revolt continues to push history into a "no man's land" on either side of itself, yet the interval it leaves in its wake becomes increasingly uninhabitable. Such is the cruelty of a festival "devoid of any authentic festive quality."<sup>77</sup>

If it is permissible to associate "authentic political autonomy" with the possibility of a joyful, expansive duration of common festive

enjoyment serving no extrinsic aim or goal beyond the increase of life itself, one which would reconcile individual and collective survival, stilled and progressive time, in a feast that “prepare[s] the way for many future feasts,” and wherein the immediate and collective consummation of material wealth would simultaneously “guarantee and accelerate the survival of the social body” — the possibility, in other words, of communism — then Jesi’s *critique* of political autonomy aims to dispel a dangerous illusion characteristic of cruel festivals, which invite us (prematurely) to feel as if, in the negativity, violence, and grief of civil wars, riots, and climate disasters, the plenitude of an authentic human community is already present in larval form.

The concept of the cruel festival offers a critical perspective upon revolutionary politics in an era marked by the emptying-out of the revolutionary subject, in which the common is accessible only by means of violent and cruel rites lacking the “joyful-collective expansion toward the duration of the collectivity” that true autonomy should afford.<sup>78</sup> In our distinctly modern desire to “transfigure a catastrophe into a mysterious festival of inhuman mirth,” we are akin to the person who strives at all costs to dance, even though the music has long-since become inaudible.<sup>79</sup> However, to affirm the impossibility of genuine festivity under present social conditions is cause for neither pessimism nor quietism; rigid disbelief is, after all, merely the other side of faith. If it is true that the study of myth can no longer be tasked with providing a positive image of the human community, what it offers instead is a conceptual and ethical methodology by means of which to decipher and interact with the new forms of revolts and political violence in our present. The role of a critical mythology is to provide tools for the decryption and evaluation of mythological symbols as they surface within concrete social situations, and to deactivate the allure of the “Other” worlds they *allude* to without being able to provide. Mythology today, is the science tasked with the destitution of Myth.

## Notes

1. Friedrich Hölderlin, “Patmos,” in *Hölderlin: Selected Verse*, Trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil, 1986), 199.
2. Furio Jesi, *Spartakus: The Symbology of Revolt*, ed. Andrea Cavalletti, Trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Seagull, 2014); Furio Jesi, *Secret Germany*, Trans. Richard Braude (London: Seagull, 2019); “A Reading of Rimbaud’s ‘Bateau ivre,’” and “Knowability of the Festival,” in Furio Jesi, *Time and Festivity*, ed. Andrea Cavalletti, Trans. Cristina Viti (London: Seagull, 2019).
3. Furio Jesi, *Spartakus. The Symbology of Revolt*, ed. Andrea Cavalletti, Trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Seagull, 2014); See also “A Reading of Rimbaud’s ‘Bateau ivre,’” reprinted in this issue of *Theory & Event*, and “Knowability of the Festival,” in *Time and Festivity*.

4. "Civil war" is here meant in the narrow sense of an armed conflict between insurgents and the forces of order, as opposed to a more encompassing ethical or ontological definition.
5. Placed in scare quotes because the Spartacist League in fact neither organized nor spearheaded it, and in some cases even argued against it, though they participated until its final moments anyway. For a compendium of primary source materials in English, see Gabriel Kuhn (ed), *All Power to the Councils! A Documentary History of the German Revolution of 1918–1919* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), 24–142. .
6. For Jesi's comments on the Hot Autumn, see Furio Jesi, "Les vandales et l'État," in *Lundimatin* #87, January 4, 2017, available here: <https://lundi.am/Les-vandales-et-l-Etat> (accessed 09.06.2019). See also Patrick Cuninghame, "'Hot Autumn': Italy's Factory Councils and Autonomous Workers' Assemblies, 1970s," in *Ours to Master and to Own – Workers' Councils from the Commune to the Present*, Edited by I. Ness and D. Azzellini (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011), 322–337; and Nanni Balestrini, *We Want Everything*, Trans. M. Holden (New York: Verso, 2016). On 1970s Italy more generally, see Marcello Tarí, *Autonomie! Italie, les années 1970*, Trans. Étienne Dobenesque (Paris: La Fabrique, 2011).
7. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, Book 3, Ch. 2.
8. *Spartakus*, 51–52.
9. *Ibid*, 44–45.
10. It is a curious feature of Jesi's thought that, at first glance anyway, he does not appear interested in revising or updating this conception of revolution, and rarely develops it beyond this rather schematic formula, preferring instead to focus on the dynamisms that interrupt and subvert its teleological logic. While this might appear to be a weakness of Jesi's position, perhaps even a straw-man argument, a more generous interpretation would hold that, in his view, any serious challenge to the historicist conception of revolution must *also* deactivate the binary system it forms with "revolt."
11. See Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx," Trans. Robert Hurley, in *Essential Works of Foucault*, Vol. 2 (New York: The New Press, 1998), 278. The Luxemburg citation is drawn from Gilles Dauvé and Denis Authier, *The Communist Left in Germany (1918–1921)*, Ch. 7. Available online here: <https://www.marxists.org/subject/germany-1918-23/dauve-authier>
12. *Spartakus*, 58.
13. Karl Retzlaw, "Noske and the Beginning of the Comrades' Murders," in Kuhn, *All Power to the Councils!*, *op cit.*, 130. Originally published as "Noske und der beginn der Genossenmorde" in Karl Retzlaw, *Spartacus – Aufstieg und Niedergang. Erinnerungen eines Parteiarbeiters* (Frankfurt: Neue Kritik, 1971). Jesi considers the theory of *agents provocateurs* to be confirmed by "reliable witness reports," which reinforces his view that the January revolt was actively incited by the SPD, who sought to push it into being prematurely, the better to crush it. See *Spartakus*, 64, 80.
14. Retzlaw, "Noske and the Beginning of the Comrades' Murders," 130.

15. *Spartakus*, 58.
16. *Spartakus*, 52.
17. Ibid.
18. *Spartakus*, 53. Emphasis added.
19. On symbolism, see also my editorial introduction the present issue.
20. Jacques Rancière, "10 Theses on Politics," in *Dissensus*, Trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 36.
21. Jean-Pierre Vernant, "The Reason of Myth," in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, Trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 47–48.
22. Jesi will later distinguish between the essence or substance of Myth, the existence of which a "mythological machine" (here, the perception of the insurgent under the sway of the event) alludes to, from "mythological materials," which are the products of the machine (here, the symbol). Since, for Jesi, is not possible to study 'myth' directly, the "science of myth" must be understood as the science of the non-knowledge of myth, the science of its absence in history. This is contrasted with the "science of mythology," which studies the workings of the mythological machine and the linguistic circulation that mythologizes experience, a science of which *Spartakus* constitutes an early example. On this point, see "When Kerenyi Diverted me from Jung," in Furio Jesi, *Time and Festivity*.
23. *Spartakus*, 53.
24. Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, Trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 47–48.
25. Friedrich Hölderlin, "Remarks on 'Oedipus'," in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, Trans. Thomas Pfau (New York: SUNY, 1988), 107.
26. On this point, see Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Trans. P. Patton, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 88–89.
27. *Spartakus*, 100.
28. Ibid.
29. *Spartakus*, 53.
30. On this use of the term, see *The Invisible Committee, To Our Friends*, Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Semiotexte, 2015), Ch. 8.
31. *Spartakus*, 46–47.
32. *Spartakus*, 47. While we might be tempted to describe the test as an 'immanent' one, the status of the symbol complicates this, as its withdrawal can allow it to bear down imperiously upon the actor with a quasi-transcendent force.
33. Andrea Cavalletti, "Introduction," in *Spartakus*, 21.
34. *Spartakus*, 53, 54–55. While an in-depth comparison exceeds the scope of this article, Jesi's analysis undoubtedly recalls Henri Lefebvre's reading of the Paris Commune as "an immense, epic festival [*fête*]," in which "the scattered and divided city became a community of actions," a "communion" in which "people acclaimed the symbols of disalienated and disalienating labor...that is to say, work as world and creator of worlds."

See Henri Lefebvre, "The Style of the Commune," in *Henri Lefebvre; Key Writings*, Edited by Stuart Elden, Elizabeth Lebas, and Eleonore Kofman (New York: Continuum, 2003), 188–189 [1965]. For Jesi's comments on the Paris Commune, see "A Reading of Rimbaud's 'Drunken Boat'" in the present issue.

35. *Ibid.*, 55.
36. *Ibid.*, 80.
37. Jesi will occasionally complicate the antagonism between the two modes of collective organization, without softening the conflictual character of the choice that these modes imply for their participants. See *Spartakus*, 84–89.
38. *Ibid.*, 57–59. Emphasis added.
39. *Spartakus*, 59. See also 68–69: "[T]he condition imposed upon workers by the capitalist system is not the *only* (and reasonable) impetus to rebel. In the phenomenon of spontaneous insurrection are also present numerous elements of rebellion born from 'private' individual frustrations, alien to the framework of class consciousness and class struggle, as well as the impulse of individuals to benefit from the experience of collective force, the force of the group." In this, Jesi perhaps owes something to Max Stirner, for whom "revolt is not grounded in some external social cause or political ideal, but first of all in the relationship to one's own life." On this point, see Jacob Blumenfeld, *All Things are Nothing to Me. The Unique Philosophy of Max Stirner* (London: Zero Books, 2018), 132–135.
40. *Spartakus*, 59–60.
41. Guy Debord, *On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Unity of Time*, in *Complete Cinematic Works*, Trans. Ken Knabb (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2003), 17.
42. On Jesi's theory of counter-insurgency, see also Ricardo Noronha's article in the present issue.
43. *Spartakus*, 61–63.
44. *Spartakus*, 61–62.
45. For a recent example of "technicized revolt" in cinema, see Henry Dunham's *The Standoff at Sparrow Creek* (2018).
46. *Spartakus*, 67.
47. *Ibid.*
48. Rosa Luxemburg, "Our Program and the Political Situation" (Dec 31, 1919), Trans. Richard Howard, *Selected Political Writings* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 403.
49. Dauvé and Autier, *The Communist Left in Germany (1918–1921)*, Ch. 6.
50. Jesi, *Spartakus*, 50.
51. *Spartakus*, 67–68. For an analogous critique emerging from within the early anti-globalization movement, and informed by Jesi's work, see Wu Ming, "Spectres of Muntzer at Sunrise / Greeting the 21st Century," in *Wu Ming Presents: Thomas Müntzer's Sermon to the Princes* (New York: Verso, 2010), section 2 and 3: "We were mistaking power's formal ceremonies for

- power itself. We were making the same mistake Müntzer and the German peasants had made..." (xxxvii). On the critique of symmetry and "symbolic citadels of power," see also The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, Ch. 4, *passim*, and Ch. 6, section 4.
52. The relation between myth, guilty conscience, and death is a major theme throughout Jesi's *Secret Germany*. On the "religion of death" in right-wing culture, see the articles by Alberto Toscano and Enrico Manera in the present issue.
  53. *Spartakus*, 68–69. Jesi never specifies precisely what he means by the term "technical" insurrection.
  54. *Spartakus*, 90.
  55. *Spartakus*, 86.
  56. Retzlaw, 131–132. On the historiographical context of these remarks, see Ricardo Noronha's article in the present issue. For another example of how an "unconscious yielding to mythologies orchestrated by power" (Cavalletti) can engender a prophetic, Manichæan, and sacrificial understanding of struggle, see Karl Liebknecht, "Despite It All!" in Kuhn, 122–125 (originally published in *Die Rote Fahne*, no.15, Jan 15, 1919).
  57. *Ibid.*
  58. Retzlaw, 132–133.
  59. *Spartakus*, 73.
  60. *Spartakus*, 89.
  61. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Trans. Daniel Heller Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 26–27.
  62. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 25: "The exception is what cannot be included in the whole of which it is a member and cannot be a member of the whole in which it is always already included."
  63. *Homo Sacer*, 12. While the Invisible Committee are certainly right to distinguish "constituent" from "destituent" insurrections, it is important to note that the insurrectional ban surfaces prior to this distinction, since it is a form of capture that takes hold precisely within the destituent phase of the revolt, before the problem of a constituent or law-making recuperation properly speaking emerges. See The Invisible Committee, *Now*, Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Semiotexte, 2017), 76–89.
  64. *Spartakus*, 59, 56.
  65. Jesi, "A Reading of Rimbaud's '*Bateau ivre*,'" included in the present issue.
  66. See Andrea Cavalletti's article, "Festival, Writing and Destruction," in the present issue.
  67. *Ibid.* On the anticipation of the mythological machine already in *Spartakus*, see also Giorgio Agamben's essay in the present issue.
  68. It is important that the mythological machine keeps myth *separate* from history, i.e., that the temporal rupture it introduces is of an *extrinsic* nature. It is something altogether different to locate and inhabit the dislocation of historical time from itself internally. In my view, Agamben's mature concept of destituent violence – with its associated concepts of desertion,

operative time, use, and exile—is defined by the *fragmentation* of historical time, rather than by its suspension. Messianism refers neither to “another time” that would signal the total effacement of chronology, nor “another day homogenous to the others,” but to an ethical gesture of seizing upon the operative time that presses upon chronology from within it, its “internal pulsation,” in order to fragment history from within. Not only does the shift from a logic of suspension to one of fragmentation point to a rupture in Agamben’s understanding of revolutionary violence, it is my contention that this shift was motivated in decisive respects by his encounter with Furio Jesi’s work. Agamben’s mature concept of destituent potential represents, on this view, the fruit of a conscious effort to circumvent the logic of the insurrectional ban, without falling back into historicism. This argument is developed in a forthcoming article entitled “Agamben’s Destituent Communism.” See Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains. A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. Trans. Patricia Daly (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 72; and Kieran Aarons, *The Political Logic of Destituent Power: Time, Subjectivity, and Revolutionary Violence*, PhD Dissertation, DePaul University, 2018.

69. David Lapoujade, *Deleuze: Aberrant Movements*, Trans. Joshua David Jordan (New York: Semiotexte, 2017), 318.
70. Andrea Cavalletti, “‘À l’heure de la révolte, on n’est plus seul dans la ville’.” Discussion avec Andrea Cavalletti a propos du *Spartakus* de Furio Jesi,” *Lundimatin* #87, January 4, 2017.
71. *Spartakus*, 142: “The epiphany of the day after tomorrow is the maturation of a *human* consciousness, for which it would be limiting to speak of class consciousness.” Jesi’s attempt to work through the limitations of “class war” is far more complex than a simple acceptance of so-called “rational” humanist values. If we are separated from our own speaking being by the workings of the mythological machine, then any effort to appeal to the rights of a “universal man” becomes at best a “pure paradox,” and at worst a manipulative appeal to what he will later (borrowing Spengler’s term) call “ideas without words.” The upshot of this rejection of humanist universalism is not to discard any concept of the human, but to consciously attempt to link any images of a “true” human community that we might tentatively adopt in the course of emancipatory struggles to practices that demythologize them from within. On the concept of an “anthropological machine,” see Furio Jesi, “Knowability of the Festival,” and Alberto Toscano’s article in the present volume. For an instructive distinction between “humanism,” “anti-humanism,” and the “non-human” in the context of the 1970s class struggle in Italy, see Gianni Carchia, “Gloss on Humanism” (1977), available online here: <http://vitalist.in/archive/gloss-on-humanism> (accessed 07.01.2019).
72. “Knowability of the Festival,” Section 1.
73. *Ibid.*
74. *Ibid.*
75. ‘Civil war’ is here meant in the narrow sense of an armed conflict between insurgents and the forces of order, as opposed to the more encompassing ethical or ontological definition it has received of late.

76. "Knowability of the Festival," Section 6.

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid.

79. "Knowability of the Festival," Section 1. See Karl Kerényi, *La religione antica nelle sue linee fondamentali*, Trans. Q. Cantimori and A. Brelich, (Rome: Astrolabio, 1959), 48. Originally published as *Die antike Religion: ein Entwurf von Grundlinien* (Düsseldorf: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1952).