

# The Agent Is the Void! From the Subjected Subject to the Subject of Action

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*This article pinpoints two lacunae—freedom and the subject of action—in post-structuralist epistemology and proposes to rethink agency through Hannah Arendt’s theory of action. It is argued that, given the sense of disorientation in theoretical and political practices, it is all the more important to reconceptualize the singularity or uniqueness of agents as initiators of social change.*

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Emancipation and, particularly, the emancipation of the subject, remains the latent ideal of the grand epistemological turn away from positivist social science. In the form of the “care of the self” (Foucault), radical democracy (Laclau and Mouffe), queering identities (Butler), traversing the fantasy that supports reality (Žižek), or activating silenced identities (Gibson-Graham), poststructuralism unmistakably contains an emancipatory agenda. Established identities have become problems rather than the “givens” of particular social contexts. The task, then, is to deconstruct or to queer identities in order to emancipate them from the hegemonic formations in which they have been trapped and against which an ethical stance begs to be taken.

As meaningful and necessary this endeavor may be, there is trouble for the simple reason that the new epistemological framework does not accommodate the question of freedom. A void remains to be filled between the theoretical starting point of an epistemology that stresses the contingent and symbolic nature of any concept, theory, practice, or identity, and its often avowed or implied emancipatory aim. The trouble with which I shall concern myself here is that the *subject as political actor*, the only theoretical or political entity that could have occupied the void by providing a link between the ideal of emancipation and the new epistemological postulates, has disappeared or has been so modified that it can no longer function as the cause of change. My first aim, then, is to disturb our new epistemological cosmos to signal an important lacuna: that of freedom.

A second aim ensues—that of questioning the extent to which a politics of identity can be liberating. Put differently, one of the main theoretical problems that poststructuralism addresses is the fixation of identities through specific hegemonic practices. The critical stance that follows from this position solicits the redefinition or disarticulation of identities. The implicit aim, therefore, is *not* identity politics per se, but the *dispersal* and *dissolution* of fixed and restrictive identities through politics. But then, shouldn't the question be one of rethinking politics from a different perspective? Borrowing from Hannah Arendt, a *political* identity would run “from place to place, from one part of the world to another, through all kinds of conflicting views, until it finally ascends from these particularities to some impartial generality” (Arendt 1977, 242). Suppose we take her cue to conceptualize a *freedom* from social identities. What would we gain from this exercise and what would we lose?

To begin with the gain: the notion of freedom. An overly sociological approach to politics regrettably misses the opportunity to break with the dominant liberal ideology that (re)presents the status quo as a “given” and fixes the margins within which we can move and think. At this point, curiously (or perhaps not so curiously), Žižek and Arendt converge in their (nonsociological) conception of freedom. In reinvigorating the Leninist opposition between “formal” and “actual” freedom, Žižek (2001) argues that the truly free choice is not a choice between alternatives within a predetermined set of coordinates, but the act of transcending or changing the coordinates themselves, of redefining the situation. In the 1960s, in a solitary act of defiance against the positivist-behavioral paradigm in political studies, Arendt similarly decries how liberalism can “banish the notion of liberty from the political realm.” Freedom has nothing to do with the liberal tenet of freedom of choice; rather, it is to be conceived as “the freedom of Brutus: ‘That this shall *be* or we will fall for it,’ that is, the freedom to call something into being which did not exist before, which was not given” (Arendt 1977, 151; emphasis added).

If we stuck obstinately to the Arendtian perspective, what we would lose, of course, would be the whole sociological/psychoanalytical insight into hegemonic practices and forms of local and everyday resistance or subjugation. In other words, we would lose the sociology of power relations in return for the politics of social relations. We would *not*, however, entertain the illusion that identities are freely constructed, an illusion that tends to “obfuscate (and thus falsely liberate us from) the constraints of social space in which our existence is trapped” (Žižek 2000a, 103). Instead, we would be able to conceptualize political action as the (re)grounding of the social—a task, incidentally, that Laclau and Mouffe propose themselves, but fail to accomplish.

Such a rethinking of freedom, not as a choice between available identities but as a radical break from them, wouldn't be tantamount to saying that identity politics is irrelevant, but would certainly suggest that overlooking freedom is not without theoretical and practical consequences. Among the theoretical consequences, on the one hand, are the gaps and inconsistencies that continue to contaminate post-structuralist efforts to conceptualize change. Among the political consequences, on the other hand, are desperate political recipes: it is as if, given the circumstances, we have no other option but to resort to a dubitable practice of psychic engineering to

emancipate the subject, or totally desert the places of power (that is, lapse into total passivity), or proceed with self-destruction (turn hysterical) in order not to be trapped by the new modes of power in our globalized capitalist world. Less radically but not less frantically, we have no other choice but to indulge our self in an individualistic, apolitical and visionless game of caring for ourselves. Are we really that desperate or have we trapped ourselves into our own theoretical mind-set? Arendt, I hope, will show us that the latter is the case.

Surprisingly enough, I am actually suggesting that Arendt's political thought could provide the poststructuralist universe with a fresh perspective. The new epistemological turn in the social sciences opens the way for a reevaluation of her theory of action, and it is now possible to discard both the liberal and the Habermasian lenses through which Arendt has most often been interpreted. This is of particular relevance, for Arendt's perspective fully embraces radical contingency without leaving us with the impossible task of choosing between a nonexistent subject and a subjected subject. The main thrust of her political theory may be summed up as the task of conceiving freedom and action as *nonsovereign* while at the same time attributing contingency to the *actor* and not to some meta-agent such as power, social practices, or the symbolic order. She is thus able to avoid some of the epistemological pitfalls of poststructuralism *and* provide a powerful critique of modernism. The main pitfall that I will take up here is the one that besets the conceptualization of the paradoxical mechanisms of subjectivation.

## 1

In poststructuralist theory, "subject" no longer designates an inherent essence or nature, but is deconstructed in such a way as to render visible the historicity and social embeddedness of its very constitution. An analysis of the emergence of the subject and of the social matrix that makes experience possible provides insight into what may be called "social identity," particularly sex, gender, race, ethnicity, and class. This certainly has the advantage of laying bare the subjugating function of identities and of exploring the conditions of possibility of their contestation. The structuralist streak in poststructuralism lies in its account of the constitution of the subject: vulnerable to subjection or subjugation in its very constitution, the subject is bound to seek its own identity and existence in categories, relations, and terms that are not of its own making (Butler 1997, 2). It is obliged to seek the signs of its existence in a discourse that is dominant and normalizing. The subject is thus defined as a site, devoid of any essential attributes. But to explain for movement or change, poststructuralist theories do not rely on causal structuralist reasoning. Instead, the subject is conceptualized in such a way that it becomes the paradoxical site of both subjection *and* subversion. The impossibility of full determination is mostly imputed to an ontological void within the symbolic order that constitutes the subject. What accounts for the possibility of subversion, what paradoxically enables the subjected subject to become the agent of political change is this void, itself external to the subject. Since the structure is not an absolute necessity, since it is a contingent and historical formation, there is no essential reason why things should be as they are.

Subjectivation is nothing but an overdetermined moment of fixation that inevitably falls short of full determination. The subject is *never* fully determined or fixated, whence the possibility of freedom from hegemonic formations or of resistance to them.

Freedom? The “freedom of the structure” as Laclau ironically puts it (1996, 18). The gap in the symbolic order explains the changes taking place in the symbolic order. Despite his Leninist conception of freedom and his insistence in restituting the subject, even Žižek seems at times to forget the subject: “What is ‘outside the Social’ is not some positive a priori symbolic form/norm, merely its negative founding gesture itself” (2000b, 311). The Real is the traumatic kernel necessarily excluded by the social-symbolic order: “the paradox is that the Real as external, excluded from the symbolic, is in fact a symbolic determination—what eludes symbolization is precisely the Real as the *inherent point of failure* of symbolization” (2000a, 121). The ontologically—and structurally—determining factor is the Real in the Symbolic, the “impossibility of the Symbolic fully to ‘become itself’” (120). The gap in the symbolic, then, is indeed the metasubject, the key to the gates of freedom.

It is my contention that we are misplacing the paradox by locating it in the social mechanisms constituting the subject. Poststructuralist theory is regrettably at an impasse, precisely at the point where the conditions of freedom (or of change) are nominated but *not fully explicated*. In order for the subject to become an agent of change, the void in the structure would need to be worked on, subverted by the subject. But how? Isn’t the subject who is supposed to resist, to take on ethical stances and queer identities, at the same time a subjected subject? Or is there something in the subject that is beyond subjectivation, a sort of “positive” substance that forever subverts the structure? Here is how Butler outlines the problem.

What does it mean . . . that the subject, defended by some as a presupposition of agency, is also understood to be an *effect* of subjection? Such a formulation suggests that in the act of opposing subordination, the subject reiterates its subjection (a notion shared by both psychoanalysis and Foucauldian accounts). How, then, is subjection to be thought and how can it become a site of alteration? A power *exerted on* a subject, subjection is nevertheless a power *assumed by* the subject, an assumption that constitutes the instrument of that subject’s becoming. (1997, 11)

Rare are the poststructuralist theorists who address this paradox. Butler, who seems to be well aware that there is a theoretical problem to be solved here, formulates a performative account of subjection. She fuses the *act* of determination with the *effect* of determination, such that the act does not precede its effect but *becomes* the effect itself. How? A paradoxical split is the key to the mysterious possibility of agency: “There is, as it were, *no conceptual transition* to be made between power as external to the subject, ‘acting on’, and power as constitutive of the subject, ‘acted by’. What one might expect by way of transition is, in fact, a splitting and reversal constitutive of the subject itself” (15; emphasis added).

Both Lacanian and Foucauldian analyses place a strong emphasis on subjection as the only existential mode by which the subject is constituted. Both are grounded in the idea of an original and ontological split, which seems to provide the solution to the problem diagnosed by Butler—that of the lack of a conceptual transition between subject and agent. The Foucauldian split in the constitutive activity of power mirrors the Lacanian subject's split constitution. In Foucault, the tension is in the discursive field of practices itself: power constitutes both its outside and its inside, both normativity and the possible field of resistance. In Lacan, the void within the symbolic explains both the psychic urge to identify and the failure of full identification.

But designating the conditions of possibility of the freedom to disidentify, rearticulate, and resist is simply not enough to show how this freedom is *exercised*. We have an extremely vicious “vicious circle” at work here. First, although efforts are made to state things differently, the underlying assumption is that the subject is a function of the gap in the symbolic order. However, in a second moment of conceptualization, the symbolic order becomes only *effectively* order (Law) if there is a subject—or, to put it differently, power does not exist prior to the constitution of the subject. Power, discourse, or the symbolic order are constitutive only performatively; that is, they are *dependent* on being assumed, cited, reiterated, and reproduced. They are dependent on the subject's subjugation. The conditioning factor then appears as only *partially* autonomous; it has been decentered in a way. The symbolic order is a pseudocreator, just as the subject is the pseudosubject of its own choices and identity. Both the subject and the symbolic order are crippled or barred. In the third and last moment, the same constitutive power is said to enable contestation: “The subject might yet be thought as deriving its agency from precisely the power it opposes” (Butler 1997, 17). Thus, the metasubject is as divided as the microsubject that it constitutes (Žižek 2000, 313). There is a strict symmetry between the two—an ironic one, at that. The constraint that the symbolic order or power or discourse is supposed to exercise is an illusion, a fantasy: it is split, decentered, and dependent as the subject it produces.

The disarming fact is that we are left with no valid reason for accepting the ontological or epistemological priority of symbolization over the subject. Aren't we back to Marx and Engels's supposedly humanist statement that “circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances” (1972, 129)? May we not say that even if the subject were an effect of symbolization, there is nothing that would hinder us from conceptualizing symbolization as an effect of the subject? Isn't symbolization itself an effect, both from the point of view of symbolization itself (it is nothing, ontologically speaking, but an effect) and from the point of view of the subject (it appears to us, subjects, that the final effect of the totality of social practices and discourses is that of lawlike symbolization)? The question itself is disturbing: Is poststructuralist theory nothing but a mapping out of power relations that form a “constructed effect” or an “effect of constitutiveness”? After all, the epistemological priority given to symbolization is not theoretically grounded. It is impossible to show that symbolization precedes the subject such that the subject is a mere effect of symbolization instead of the other way round.

## 2

One way to resolve the dilemma would be to consider power not as an ontological fact but as an epistemological entry point that helps generate a certain form of knowledge that other theories, using the entry point of the subject, aren't able to produce. Poststructuralist epistemology asks a particular set of questions and necessarily obtains a particular set of answers. But the designation of the object of analysis will also predetermine the theoretical knowledge constructed.

This point can be illustrated with the aid of the distinction Arendt makes between "who" someone is and "what" someone is (1958, 179). The "what" is defined as those attributes that "someone" is supposed to possess: personality, identity, qualities, talents, and shortcomings. Considering "someone" from this exclusive point of view effectively limits her to being a sum of attributes. Poststructuralist theory is quite right in denying that these attributes are the subject's own; they are socially imputed or, rather, they constitute a *social* subject. The problem with these attributes is that they are "typical"; they are what "someone" shares with others like her. Whereas the "who" defies generalization and categorization, the "what" is indeed the product of a power beyond the subject.

In addition to this, using the entry point of "what someone *wants*" will also predetermine the theoretical outcome. The Lacanian interpellation "*che vuoi?*" produces a specific set of answers, defining action according to the meaning the actor attributes to it. Focusing on what someone wants necessarily orients us to the "inner self" (the psyche) where conscious or unconscious motives are at work. One desire may effectively conceal another, such that the subject is never sure of being the conscious agent of its own action.

By opting for the specific entry points of "what someone is" and "what someone wants," poststructuralist theory bars its chances of understanding agency. It is either left with a series of lacks to be filled by discourse, or with a crippled subject whose maneuvering space is ensnared by power relations. This subject is the only one that can be apprehended by poststructuralist epistemology. Or, to be fair, this is the subject that poststructuralist theory chooses to analyze. The knowledge constituted by poststructuralist theory, therefore, is relevant for understanding the subjectivity and sociability of subjects, but not for understanding agency or freedom.

But what if locating the paradox in a process transcending the self were part of the problem? What if poststructuralism had gone too far in wanting to discard the notion of the self because it has been tainted for centuries by liberalism and positivism? What if bringing back the concept of the self—of the individual self—in such a way as to avoid the liberal-positivist framework was to provide a more appropriate theoretical entry point with which to (re)think political action?

## 3

This is where I think Arendt enters. As opposed to poststructuralist theories of subjectivation, the Arendtian perspective seeks to highlight dissimilarities instead of

similarities, refuses to subsume unique actors under ideal types, and focuses on the effect of their action rather than on the cause.

In a nutshell, the Arendtian self is an entity that is always more than the sum of its social identities. Social identities operate through an articulating principle whose locus is the self, but the self is always something in excess of identity, in excess of language and therefore of conceptualization or symbolization. The reason for this is simply that the *self is unique*—something that language, because it is a system of differences, cannot possibly express. Borrowing Foucault's terminology, it can be said that the singularity of the self constitutes it as an *event* rather than as an effect of social structures.

Arendt's notion of plurality is her version of the negativity—the void—that enables the queering of social determinations. Plurality literally means that no two persons are exactly identical, that singularity is the ontological human condition. Translating into postmodern language, Arendt would be insisting that no identity can be so fixed that an actor's actions will be fully explained through general discursive causalities. The actor *can* (and this is the “I can” of freedom) fit herself into a number of subject positions, but “who she is” encompasses and transcends them all. The real paradox is that we are all the same (that is, we are all gendered, socialized, ethnicized, etc.) *but* that we are all different: “we are the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live” (Arendt 1958, 8).

Since Žižek is resolute in restituting the category of the subject, it would be interestingly mischievous to proceed by forcing him into dialogue with Arendt. Despite the above-mentioned position in which he attributes freedom to the void in the Symbolic order, Žižek simultaneously conceptualizes *the subject as the void*. He argues that the subject emerges where ideology—that is, the trap of social identities, of subject positions and of interpellation—fails. This subject is to be distinguished from the poststructuralist notion of “subject position,” since the latter connotes subjectivation: “if we subtract all the richness of the different modes of subjectivation, all the fullness of experience present in the way the individuals are ‘living’ their subject-positions, what remains is the empty place which is filled out with this richness; this original void, this lack of symbolic structure *is* the subject, the subject of the signifier. The *subject* is therefore to be strictly opposed to the effect of *subjectivation*” (1989, 175). Butler's paradox seems partially resolved: ontologically speaking, the subject is not synonymous with subjectivation. The paradox, it seems, is a result of the failure of language (or of the symbolic order) to adequately represent the subject. The subject of the signifier is a “retroactive effect of the failure of its own representation” and must therefore be represented (in theory) by the void in the Symbolic order (1989, 175). In other words, Žižek almost seems to go so far as to say that the void we attribute to the Symbolic order (and which causes so many headaches, as expressed above) is an effect of a peculiar quality of the subject, although we have no other option but to (re)present it the other way around.

Curiously enough, though, this subject who is a pure negativity constitutes itself through a self-positing act. According to Žižek, this is what enables freedom to be conceived as “the capacity to ‘transcend’ the coordinates of a given situation, to ‘posit the presuppositions’ of one's activity ... i.e. to redefine the very situation

within which one is active” (2001, 3). But the question is then one of explaining how pure negativity may act: “Can the gap, the opening, the Void which precedes the gesture of subjectivization, still be called ‘subject?’” (2000a, 119). Yes, according to Žižek.

No, according to Arendt. What is unsymbolizable in the subject and what simultaneously accounts for its capacity to “force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries” (Arendt 1958, 190) is the ontological fact of singularity. The void is not a pure, ontological negativity; had it been so, it could not have acted. The void is merely a *representational* void. Singularity, the positive substance that enables the subject to act in such a way as to “transcend the coordinates of a given situation,” cannot possibly be taken into account by language. When and if it is categorized, it ceases to become singular; rather, it becomes part of the ideological structure, a “what” instead of a “who.” Only the subject as actor—as *différance* impersonated—can move and act. Singularity is the event that bursts open meanings by never allowing them to stabilize. The subjected/subjectivated subject stands where ideology *succeeds* in naming, categorizing, representing, and thus binding the subject to the structure. But where the impossible happens, it is the singularity of the unsymbolizable entity behind the act that makes it happen.

Arendt probably did not have the faintest clue about poststructuralism. Her theory of the subject preceded the now familiar jargon of “subjectivation,” “interpellation,” and “barred subject,” but the difference in terminology should not discourage the reader. In Arendt, the real source of contingency, the reason neither society nor any identity can attain a moment of full closure, is singularity. Established structures and meanings are constantly destabilized through three existential mechanisms related to singularity: the gaze, the story, and action.

As Villa convincingly argues, “Arendt’s theory of political action should be read as the sustained attempt to think of praxis outside the teleological framework” (1996, 47). Of course, all action aims at something, but what Arendt’s anti-Weberian stance implies is that the meaning and achievement of action do not exhaust themselves in the aims or motives of the actor. To “act” in the Arendtian sense is to begin, to initiate (*arkhein*) and to bear or finish (*prattein*) (Arendt 1958, 189; 1977, 165, 166). At equal distance from both modernism and postmodernism, Arendt’s actor is the *cause* of an action but not the author of the whole network of stories that begin with this action. Arendt seems to echo the Heideggerian notion of thrown projection, the taking up or creative appropriation of possibilities that are given to us, when she writes: “With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance. This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work” (Arendt 1958, 176). The actor, by virtue of her uniqueness, begins something new, a new relation or a new set of circumstances that other actors need subsequently to take into consideration. She does not merely *bear* existence, but *inserts* something new into the world. This conceptualization of action is evidently more suggestive of the authentic political act cherished by Žižek than of Butler’s theory of performativity as reiteration.

It is important to note, however, that although freedom enables the actor to become the “hero” of a story by beginning something new, she is never the author of

the whole story. What makes Arendt's conception of action truly original is the way in which she refuses to equate freedom with sovereignty and dependence with subjugation. The modernist scheme of theorizing freedom in terms of sovereignty "leads either to a denial of human freedom—namely, if it is realized that whatever men may be, they are never sovereign—or to the insight that the freedom of one man, or a group, or a body politic can be purchased only at the price of the freedom, i.e., the sovereignty, of all others," she writes (1977, 164). Arendt claims that it is action that constitutes history but that history has no particular subject or agent. Unwittingly avoiding both a structuralist scheme and a liberal one, she grounds this seemingly paradoxical claim on the boundlessness of action, itself an outcome of the singularity of actors: "Since action acts upon beings who are capable of their own actions, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others" (1958, 190).

Undermining the sovereignty of the actor—and consequently, the stability of structures—without attributing the failure of symbolic closure to any lack in the human psyche or to a metasubjective discursive process relieves Arendt's theoretical framework of the burden of excessive ontologizing. The causes of instability and nonsovereignty are relational. This is of political significance: others constitute the condition of possibility of action and have an effect on the outcome. Others may carry (*prattein*) the initial action (*arkhein*) into completion or carry it into a totally unintended and unforeseen direction or refuse to carry it through altogether. In the latter cases, the initial action may be thoroughly disfigured or it may turn into an abortive attempt, a *mort-né*, a dead end. As well as being a form of subjection or of impotence, then, the dependence on others is also the existential condition that confers its transformative power on action. Others may indeed trap us within ideological structures, but without "acting in concert" with others, the self would be nothing but impotent—or hysterical.

The dependence of *arkhein* on *prattein* is redoubled by the self's dependence on the gaze. Gazing at others and being gazed at also have two fundamental effects on the self. First, others (the use of the plural is important because we are not referring to some incorporeal "Other") fulfill the existential mission of pulling the self away from the slippery ground of subjectivity where nothing is real and nothing can be stabilized because there is no essential attribute of the subject (there is no essential answer to "*che vuoi?*"). The gaze of others, themselves in the plural and also subject to the same relation of visibility, exhorts the self out of itself, toward unity with itself, toward the irrevocable (positive) reality of its own existence and of its own (positively acquired) identity. Plurality is a blessing in that the perspective of the others not only defines and stabilizes one's own perspective, irrespective of how it was obtained in the first place, but also puts it in relation with the world, the "in-between." The possibility of fixing meanings and identities is not a minor blessing; it is a remedy to solipsism. I am who I am by virtue of my actions that "take effect" among others—and not by virtue of some fantastic ego-ideal that I may have constructed in the socialized solitude of my psyche.

Second, if the plurality of gazes is the prerequisite for the fixation of identities or "communities," it is also the condition of possibility of the contestation of meanings and identities. Unpredictability is an effect of the confrontation of the plurality of

perspectives that forms any given community. As is the case with action, the plurality of gazes to which meanings and practices are subjected plays a destabilizing role on language. The latter becomes a system of signs that are incessantly used, appropriated, subverted, and discarded by a plurality of singular selves. In other words, there is nothing inherently unstable in language itself; singular agents are the source of the instability of any system of representation.

To avoid all misunderstanding, Arendt is not asserting that “beneath . . . social roles and masks [there is] a human being, a complex unique personality,” the very idea that accounts for the efficiency of ideological identification according to Žižek (2000a, 103). But she certainly is asserting that it is political action that performatively creates the unique self as a positive substance under the gaze of others. The “who someone is,” in fact, amounts to the sum total of willful stances taken in *unpredictable situations* throughout a lifetime, stances that are not linked together prior to the taking of the stance by some coherent cause (like personality), but that take on the *form* of unity when narrated by the self or by others. For it is impossible to “solidify in words the living essence of the person as it shows itself in the flux of action and speech” (Arendt 1958, 181), essence being here nothing but the (hi)story of the person always in formation—that is, a flux of revelatory actions that ends, and achieves a final form and meaning, only when that particular life ends.

Because contingency is the law of the human universe consisting in singular beings, individual or collective action can acquire unity only through transformation and condensation in a narrative. While the actor may never be fully aware of the meaning of her action so long as she is in action, narrative has the advantage of resolving the dialectic between action and identity, plot and character, necessity and freedom (Rasmussen 1996, 165). The narrative provides the actor with the initiative to begin a story but, even as it does so, it simultaneously overwhelms the actor in the inevitable unfolding of events. The onlooker tells the story of individual action, its meaning, and the world it opened up by tying in the loose ends and providing the story with a consistency that it may not otherwise have. The evident risk in this other-dependence is, of course, the possibility of the other’s giving the story an ideological twist, something no actor can totally circumvent.

This performative notion of the self, grounded as it is in unique stances taken under specific circumstances, transcends the confines of poststructuralism. The self is not restricted by conventional subject positions that any given social configuration might make available at any given moment in time, such as man/woman, gay/lesbian, African/Caucasian, Protestant/Catholic, jobholder/unemployed, Left/Right, and so on. The way Arendt defines it, action is the name to be given to that which defies conventional limits and establishes new meanings or inspires new stories. Action is not predictable behavior, the stuff upon which Foucauldian governmentality depends. Arendt thus constructs a different kind of knowledge, one in which there are actors who are potentially unique and unpredictable—always a threat to the fixity of norms, to the despair of disciplinary apparatuses. As subjected subjects we behave in a predictable fashion but, at the same time, are never fully predictable. Acting means inscribing oneself in the course of events in such a way as to modify the initial circumstances under which we act. The actor, in other words, is the subject who *exposes* herself to the “risks of new experiences” to which she doesn’t yet know how

she shall respond (Dunne 1996, 146). As Žižek would certainly agree, this is of ethical significance. Speech act theory, as appropriated by Arendt, doesn't imply a self-understanding or reasoned action, but it does imply a commitment to a certain construction of the public self: not a "subject position" but a willful "stance" whose content, form, and consequences are not entirely foreseeable by anyone.

This perspective has the advantage of decentering the will without negating it, attributing change to the actor without exaggerating her power, and situating the self within structures constitutively shared by others without exaggerating *their* power. In short, it has the advantage of keeping the baby while throwing out the bathwater.

#### 4

This is where the political significance of Arendt's notion of the self enters. Singularity and politics entertain a crucial link: singularity can leave a trace or impose change only if agents acting in concert succeed in opening up a political space in which the resymbolization of the symbolic order becomes possible. Political action, in the Arendtian sense, is precisely this opening, this breaking with sameness or with the claustrophobic politics of locality. The opening up of a space in which unique beings or unique struggles can reappropriate the terms of the antagonism that opposes them to power and can thereby resymbolize sociopolitical relations is what Arendt calls politics. Action in the Arendtian sense is not a psychoanalytical "traversing of the fantasy" or a defiant game with one's identity, both of which are solitary accomplishments. Action is relational in that it is simultaneously a beginning, a "relating to," and a disclosing (Tassin 1996, 358). The opening up of a space in between, with others and among others, enables each to encounter the other as both other and not-other, to recognize the other as constitutive of the *Mitwelt* (common world) despite her otherness. Political action thus enables togetherness without imposing sameness. Not insignificantly, the existential "meaning" of politics is freedom, the freedom to break with the status quo, to create new relations.

Such is the interdependence between singularity and the form of the political space which "receives" it that singularity either lacks any existential reality without community or it fails to instigate new realities and meanings, becoming totally futile, ephemeral, or worse, merely destabilizing. Given the fractured yet sterile ideological spaces opened up by capitalism, any singularity that manages to become visible paradoxically feeds into the movement away from the collective possibility of resymbolization. When the form of political space created by actors takes on such ontological importance, not the identity of the actors, but the relational outcome of their actions gains prime significance.

Of great importance is the capacity of the political project to be binding instead of merely destabilizing. Creating or initiating a new set of relations without narrowing down differences means *construction* as well as *deconstruction*. The *lieu* of a properly political project, in other words, is not a *nonlieu*; politics cannot consist of the purely negative act of deserting the places of power (Hardt and Negri 2000, 212). Pure negativity as such is not an existential condition. The negative act may indeed

destabilize, but it falls short of the positive determination of alternative existential conditions without which a change in the status quo cannot be projected in any desirable or ethical direction.

Thus, Arendtian politics is exactly what Laclau and Mouffe refer to as a “practice of creation” or “the problem of the institution of the social” (1985, 153). What Laclau and Mouffe do not realize, however, is that thinking the subject along the lines of identity politics cannot provide for the leap from the social into the political.

It is actually not clear why the question of identity has acquired such ontological importance in recent theorizing. Although identity politics may be seen as a reaction to previous theories that naturalize the very distinctions that they build upon, it is also an overreaction that covers up its own conditions of possibility: processes and transformations accompanying the globalization of capitalism. An Arendtian perspective would bring to attention the need to historicize the preoccupation with identities and to put into a sociohistorical perspective the present inability to conceive of agonistic politics as anything but a politics of identity. Arendt’s suspicion of the social (acquired through Heidegger’s denigration of everyday life as the reign of the anonymous *They*) and her equally strong suspicion of psychologizing tendencies lead her to question the return to the question of identity as a means of salvation. Identity politics or the action upon the self is “the only action left when all acting . . . has become futile” (Arendt 1978, 161). Capitalism is, in fact, the sociohistorical context in which the preoccupation with the self emerged: “The greatness of Max Weber’s discovery about the origins of capitalism lay precisely in his demonstration that an enormous, strictly mundane activity is possible without any care for or enjoyment of the world whatever, an activity whose deepest motivation, on the contrary, is worry and *care about the self*. World alienation, and not self-alienation as Marx thought, has been the hallmark of the modern age” (1958, 254, emphasis added). The implication is clear: what happens to the self must be thought in conjunction with what happens to the “world” in the Heideggerian sense of an existential-relational “in-between.” Despite the Heideggerian language, the Arendtian perspective is of significance to poststructuralist theory in that it prompts reflection on how the concern with the subjected subject is the result of a particular mode of being that characterizes Western modernity. Ironically enough, both the positing of an autonomous subject by Enlightenment *and* the postmodern response to it are grounded in a particular historical form of public space: modern capitalist society with its various economic and political apparatuses, in which the possibility of beginning something new, the conditions of remembrance, and the collective capacity to carry action through are severely reduced. The language of victimization that the politics of identity speaks is indeed a reaction to this state of affairs.

It should be clear by now that the capacity to act (instead of merely behaving) does not guarantee that action will transform available configurations. The latter depends entirely on the capacity of action to create common political spaces that cut across social or political boundaries. Therefore, if resistance or any type of struggle is to provide an example and not a new rule, it *must* become visible and inspire others to take up the cue in acting in an exemplary way, but in their *own* way.

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