What is an Insurrection? Destituent power and ontological anarchy in Agamben and Stirner

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to develop a theoretical understanding of the insurrection as a central concept in radical politics. If one looks at recent uprisings around the world – from Occupy Wall Street, to the Indignados in Spain, to 'hacktivist' networks like Anonymous - one observes a form of action and mobilisation reducible neither to simple acts of civil disobedience, nor to a revolutionary model of politics. Instead, these movements signify a kind of withdrawal from formal systems of power; their emphasis is more on the creation of autonomous political spaces and modes of interaction than on the construction of political agendas and the representation of demands to the state. By contrast the idea of revolution, as the seizure of political power by an organised vanguard party, seems less easy to appeal to today. Despite attempts recently by some political theorists to resuscitate and rethink the idea of the vanguard party as a mode of political organisation - particularly in the context of mass mobilisations like Occupy (see for instance Dean 2012) – others suggest that this has been entirely superseded by a new model of emancipatory politics, in which self-organisation and the desire for autonomy from state institutions are the defining features (Graeber 2009, 2014; Castells 2015). Whereas the revolution is an instrumental form of action which aims, through organised political force, to seize the reins of government and use state power to transform the totality of social relations – that is, to constitute a new society – insurrection works within the fabric of existing social relations, opening up spaces of resistance and autonomy that are in a sense immanent within it (see Caygill 2013, 199). It does not seek to impose a unified

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political will to reshape or reconstitute society according to a particular vision or plan but, rather, affirms, in a pre-figurative way, a free form of activity and being-in-common in the present.

My aim here is to understand the insurrection as a distinct political idea. I will do this by exploring the parallel thinking of contemporary Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben and nineteenth-century German philosopher and Young Hegelian, Max Stirner. I will argue that, despite their differences, they share an insurrectionary theoretical approach which can help us clarify the coordinates of the contemporary political horizon. I shall suggest that both thinkers propose a form of political activity and ethics which is neither Marxist nor, strictly speaking, anarchist – although it is certainly closer to the latter - and which is reducible neither to constituent nor constituted power but which, rather, affirms a kind of *destituent* power or, as I put it, an indifference to power.

I will trace this theme through a number of points of intersection. First, I will explore the structural similarities between Stirner's model of insurrection or 'uprising', and Agamben's notion of destituent power, which he counterposes to constituent or revolutionary power. Second, I will link these parallel concepts to a notion of *ontological anarchism*, which I argue both thinkers are in different ways committed to, despite their ambivalent relationship to anarchism as a political ideology. I interpret ontological anarchism here in terms of a non-foundational political theory in which essential identities and fixed normative categories are destabilised. Third, I explore what I see as the profane thinking characteristic of both thinkers – that is, the attempt to desacralize life, to free it from the abstract and theological categories in which it has hitherto been trapped. Next, I examine the implications this has for subjectivity: both thinkers, in different ways, put forward an alternative notion of the subject as being without vocation – that is, without a pre-defined purpose or *telos*. Here I draw on Stirner's related notions of egoism and 'ownness', and

Agamben's motifs of 'whatever singularity' and 'form of life'. Last, I will show how important differences between these thinkers emerge around questions of agency, community and political action, which highlight some of the key dilemmas faced by insurrectionary politics today. Here I will argue that Stirner's 'egoistic' and voluntarist approach to insurrection provides a more tangible and positive way of thinking about political action than Agamben's at times vague, albeit highly suggestive, notion of inoperativity. My overall aim in teasing out these points of convergence and difference is to formulate an alternative model of insurrectionary political theory as a way of understanding non-hegemonic, post-sovereign forms of radical politics today.

Insurrection and revolution

Stirner and Agamben are two thinkers not often considered together. Their thinking emerges within, and responds to, different philosophical traditions – nineteenth century Hegelianism and humanism, in the case of the former, and twentieth century Heideggerian philosophy and contemporary currents of post-Althusserian, post-Foucaultian thought in the case of the latter. Moreover, while their thinking might be characterised as 'anarchistic' in the sense that both oppose the sovereignty of the state and affirm notions of singularity and autonomous political action (see Bargu 2011), their relationship to the anarchist tradition is ambiguous. Yet, there are, I would suggest, important connections between them, particularly in their ontologically anarchic understanding of the subject as a being without foundation, essence or *telos*. Indeed, for both thinkers, subjectivity is an 'ungovernable' space of life which exceeds, and is indifferent to, abstract norms, ideological categories and political institutions founded upon metaphysical thinking (see de Ridder 2011: 143-164; Heron 2011).

What interests me in these two thinkers is the way that – in critically engaging with politics at an ontological level (see Abbott 2014; Jenkins 2014) – they radically destabilise existing political categories and institutions, thus opening up an alternative space in which

new and more autonomous forms of subjectivity, action and community can emerge. Yet, it is perhaps because of their indifference to the existing normative coordinates of politics that they have often faced accusations, from various quarters, of nihilism or, at best, of political irrelevance (see Paterson 1971; Virno 2002). Yet, although Stirner and Agamben are resistant to making explicit political gestures of any kind, my argument is that their ontologically anarchic approach to subjectivity and action – while it has different implications for each thinker – radically transforms our understanding of politics, particularly in the context of the dilemmas faced by activists today following the eclipse of the horizon of revolutionary politics.

My claim is that the Marxist-Leninist project of revolution – that is the attempt to transform the field of social relations through the seizure of state power – is no longer operative today, and that we need a new 'non-strategic' paradigm of political action that, at the same time, contests and transcends the current neoliberal order in which politics has for the past decades been trapped. The emergence of new waves of resistance to global capitalism following the protests against the WTO summit in Seattle in 1999 - through to more recent articulations in the Occupy movement - has led to a renewed interest in anarchism as an alternative non-Marxist or non-Leninist form of radical politics, especially because of the decentralised, democratic 'networked' structures and forms of direct, extra-institutional action they seemed to embody (see Graeber 2002; Day 2005; Gordon 2008; Maeckelbergh 2009; Jun 2010; Bray 2013). Such practices are closer perhaps to the anarchist understanding of social revolution – as distinct from a purely political revolution (see Bakunin 1971, 180) – in the sense that they involve attempts to transform, from the ground up and in a 'prefigurative' way, one's immediate social relationships, as well as promoting radical change at a broader social and political level.

I would like to think more carefully about the space of mediation between action that transforms one's immediate circumstances and relations with others – what might be called micro-political action – and macro-political action aimed at transforming society at a broader level. For the anarchist, Gustav Landauer, any kind of revolutionary action always presupposed an ethical transformation in one's everyday relations with others: 'The state is a social relationship; a certain way of people relating to one another. It can be destroyed by creating new social relationships; i.e., by people relating to one another differently.' (2010, 213-4) It is precisely in this space between individual ethical transformation and political action, that we should situate our discussion of Agamben and Stirner.

On one of the few occasions that Agamben refers to Stirner directly, it is in relation to Stirner's notion of the insurrection, which Agamben views as a form of personal revolt and 'egoistic act of subtraction', which presented a serious challenge to Marx's revolutionary politics based on the collective class subject (see Agamben 2004a, 115-124; see also 2005b, 31-2). Agamben proposes here a kind mediation between this purely individualistic revolt – what he calls a destituting line of flight from the state – and more collective forms of political action: 'I believe it is not necessary to oppose political action and flight, revolt and revolution, but to try to think what's between them.' (2004a, 121) I will return to this question of collective action. But for the present, we need to examine Stirner's concept of insurrection (*Empörung* or 'Uprising'), which he distinguishes from revolution and yet which, as I would suggest, does not exclude or rule out other forms of transformative political action, acting, rather, as a necessary supplement to them. Stirner says:

> Revolution and insurrection must not be looked upon as synonymous. The former consists in an overturning of conditions, of the established condition or *status*, the state or society, and is accordingly a *political* or *social* act; the latter has indeed for its unavoidable consequence a transformation of circumstances, yet does not start from it

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but from men's discontent with themselves, is not an armed rising but a rising of

individuals, a getting up without regard to the *arrangements* that spring from it. The

Revolution aimed at new arrangements; insurrection leads us no longer to *let*

ourselves be arranged, but to arrange ourselves, and sets no glittering hopes on

'institutions'. It is not a fight against the established, since, if it prospers, the

established collapses of itself; it is only a working forth of me out of the established

(1995, 279-80; all emphasis in original).

Where the revolution works to transform external social and political conditions and

institutions, the insurrection is aimed at one's own self-transformation (it starts 'from men's

discontent with themselves'); it involves placing oneself *above* external conditions and

constraints, whereupon these constraints simply disintegrate. It starts from the affirmation of

the self, and the political consequences flow from this. The insurrection, unlike the

revolution, works against institutions – but not necessarily in the sense of seeking to get rid of

all institutions, as this would lead simply to different kinds of institutions – but rather in the

sense of asserting one's power over institutions, and indeed, one's autonomy from them. It

suggests a way of unbinding ourselves from systems of power and our dependency on them,

even our desire for them (it is a 'working forth of me out of the established'). It is, more

precisely, extra-institutional rather than anti-institutional.

We can see that this notion of insurrection is radically different from most

understandings of political action. It eschews the idea of an overarching project of

emancipation; freedom is not the end goal of the insurrection but, rather, its starting point. In

this sense, it is *ontologically anarchic*; it emanates from a radical indeterminacy that

characterizes subjectivity. In other words, the insurrection starts not with the desire to change

external conditions which might be said to oppress the individual, but rather with the

assertion of the self over these conditions. So, rather than a revolutionary project which sets

itself the goal of liberating people from institutionalized power – and which risks merely imposing upon them another kind of power in its place – the insurrection allows people to constitute their own freedom by first reclaiming their own self.

Destituent Power

To grasp the insurrection in its specificity, it is necessary to relate it to the category of *destituent* power, which has become more prominent in the wake of recent mobilizations against neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, the concept of destituent power first emerged in the analysis by Colectivo Situaciones of the popular uprisings against neoliberal policies in Argentina in 2001. *Poder destituyente* referred to specific kind of political action which took the form of a refusal of the legitimacy of governing political and legal institutions. This was symbolised by the slogan of these movements: 'Que se vayan todos!' ('They all must go!'), signifying a complete rejection of Argentina's political and economic elites. Destituent power referred, then, to an extra-institutional form of political mobilization which sought autonomy from state institutions rather than the representing specific demands and interests through the state. However, this uprising was at the same time different from a revolution: it was not an attempt to violently overthrow the existing political system with a view to establishing a new one in its place. Rather, the Argentinan insurrection signified a *de-instituting,* rather than instituting, moment: a withdrawal of support from the sovereign political order, without the desire to replace it with another sovereign political order. Sovereignty is instead suspended, deposed, de-instituted. Colectivo Situactiones refer, then, to a movement that 'far from founding a new sovereign order, operates by delegitimizing the politics executed in its name.' (Colectivo Situaciones 2002, 52). However, as they point out, this refusal of sovereignty does not make such movements apolitical; rather, 'to renounce support to a representative (sovereign) politics is the condition – and the premise – of situational thinking and of a series of practices whose meanings are no longer demanded from the state.' (2002, 53-4) The de-

instituting gesture characteristic of such movements does not renounce politics as such, but instead opens up alternative spaces for political practices, discourses and forms of association which exceed the state and whose meaning is no longer determined by it.

A similar notion of destituent power has been proposed by political theorist, Raffaele Laudani, who, in reference to radical social movements not only in Latin America, but also in the Middle East (the Arab Spring) and throughout Europe and North America, also points to a rejection of established modes of representation. Destituent action, in contrast to civil disobedience, is not the desire to change particular laws or government policies, but instead refuses the very legitimacy of the political-legal order by withdrawing support from it. Yet, as Laudani argues, destituent power is also distinct from revolutionary action and cannot be seen simply anti-institutional:

> Despite carrying clear libertarian instances, destituent power is not anti-institutional per se, because, on the contrary, it makes the assumption of the nonartificial and ineradicable presence of power and its institutions. Its action is instead extrainstitutional, in the sense that unlike revolution and other forms of modern political action inspired by constituent power, it is not primarily motivated by an institutionalizing end (2013, 4-5).

This is an important point, which will become central to my own theorisation of the destituent dimension of the insurrection: unlike revolutions, which always risk the re-institution of power, insurrections, in suspending the operation of power, seek to keep open a space of political contingency in which new and autonomous practices, discourses and relations might emerge.

In developing this notion of insurrection, we can turn to Giorgio Agamben's own understanding of destituent power, which he distinguishes from Antonio Negri's idea of

constituent or revolutionary power (see Negri 1999, 10). Similarly to Stirner, Agamben (1998, 43-4) suggests that constituent revolutionary power remains trapped within the very order of sovereignty and institutional power it aims to exceed.[1] Revolutionary force – or what Negri calls constituent power – always ends up instituting a new sovereign political order. Therefore, contra Negri, no clear distinction can be drawn between constituent and constituted power, between revolutionary potentiality and the constituted political and legal order. This is why Agamben proposes a notion of destituent power [*potenza destituente*] which escapes the dialectic between constituent and constituted power:

> If the fundamental ontological question today is not work but inoperativity, and if this inoperativity can, however, be deployed only through a work, then the corresponding political concept can no longer be that of 'constituent power' [potere constituente], but something that could be called 'destituent power' [potenza destituente]… A power that was only just overthrown by violence will rise again in another form, in the incessant, inevitable dialectic between constituent power and constituted power, violence which makes the law and violence that preserves it (Agamben 2014, 65-74).

I will return to this important concept of inoperativity, but it is clear at this stage that Agamben has in mind a form of political activity which is completely different from the revolutionary projects of the past: many of those projects of emancipation ended up instrumentalizing political power in ways that led to their own ossification. Conceiving of politics as a project, as an goal-oriented form of activity which subordinates means to ends – and in doing so ends up sacrificing those very ends themselves – is precisely what Agamben

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[1] Agamben's reference here is to Walter Benjamin's claim that the 'mythic violence' of revolutionary action is essentially another form of law-making and remains caught within the structure of sovereign power (see Benjamin 1996).

is getting at when he refers to 'work', to politics as work. Instead he affirms a form of pre-figurative political activity understood in terms of inoperativity – which I read as a kind of withdrawal from the ontological order of power and from all overarching political projects. Destituent power may be understood, then, as an *exodus* from the order of sovereignty altogether, neither operating within it, nor seeking to capture it in a revolutionary sense, nor even seeking to destroy it: all these moves are, in a sense, caught up within the paradigm of sovereignty. Rather, destituent power suspends the very order of sovereignty and invokes a form of life, activity and politics that is autonomous from it.

Ontological anarchism

Stirner's insurrection and Agamben's destituent power both invoke, then, a kind of extra-institutional politics which withdraws from the sovereignty of the state and affirms more autonomous form of life and activity. While this bears of course some resemblance to anarchism, we must be slightly careful here: neither Stirner nor Agamben can accurately be described as anarchists, at least according to the familiar coordinates of that ideological tradition. Neither thinker, for instance, relies on an ontological foundation in human nature or social relations, as in Peter Kropotkin's notion of 'mutual aid' as a natural pre-disposition towards sociability (see Kropotkin 1972). Moreover, while their politics is directed towards the deactivation of state power, neither thinker promotes any particular program of revolution nor any clear vision of a stateless society. Their thought is actually closer to a *postanarchist* position, which, in drawing upon poststructuralist theory, proposes a form of anarchistic politics without essentialist foundations in human nature and without any predestined goal of revolution or a particular model of social relations (see Newman 2001; May 1994). Rather, postanarchism is an ontologically anarchic form of politics which – in questioning the determinacy and legitimacy of any power relationship – has anarchism as its starting point rather than its end goal (see Newman 2016). Postanarchist theory explicitly draws on thinkers

like Stirner who, while denouncing the state as an institution utterly incompatible with 'egoism', nevertheless has an ambiguous and marginal place within the anarchist canon – precisely because he rejected the moral, rational and humanist categories which nineteenth century 'scientific anarchism' situated itself within, as well as regarding any sort of revolutionary collectivism with suspicion.

Agamben's relationship with anarchism is perhaps even more ambiguous. At many points his politics seems to bear a direct affinity with an anarchist or at least anti-statist politics, especially when he hauntingly predicts the 'coming politics' as a struggle not over the control of the state, but rather '*between the State and the non-State (humanity)*' (Agamben 1993, 84). Elsewhere, however, he is dismissive of anarchism, seeing it – perhaps somewhat crudely – as having an insufficient understanding of state power and as being victim to the same analytical blind spot regarding the state as the Marxist revolutionary tradition (Agamben 1998, 12). Furthermore, Agamben points to what he sees as the structural relationship between anarchy and power: 'anarchy is what government presupposes and assumes as the origin from which it derives, and at the same time the destination toward which it is travelling.' (2011, 64) In other words, the functioning of governmental power is increasingly anarchic, or we could say nihilistic, in that it is no longer driven towards any general project for social improvement or human fulfilment; it is simply the blind and contingent operation of power, which seeks merely to manage the crises – of security, economy, ecology – that it itself generates. Yet, anarchy, this spectre and shadow of governmental power is not to be conflated with *anarchism* - and actually here Agamben echoes a point made by many anarchists themselves who distinguish between anarchy as disorder and chaos, and anarchism as a viable form of social order without a state (2014, 73). What I want to suggest is that both Agamben and Stirner - while their politics cannot be reduced to anarchism in any simplistic sense – might nevertheless be considered

ontologically anarchic political thinkers. By this I mean that they are interested in displacing forms of sovereign power without necessarily proposing any alternative (even non-statist or anarchist) social order in its place; in this sense their thinking is insurrectionary rather than revolutionary, according to the distinction I have drawn above.[2] Agamben himself, while pointing to the structural complicity between anarchy and power, wants to extract from this a different understanding of anarchy – one that no longer serves power but, on the contrary, fundamentally displaces it: 'Since power (*archē*) constitutes itself through the inclusive exclusion (the *ex-ceptio*) of anarchy, the only possibility of thinking a true anarchy coincides with the exhibition of the anarchy internal to power. Anarchy is that which becomes possible only in the moment that we grasp and destitute the anarchy of power' (Agamben 2014, 72). According to Agamben, then, power captures anarchy: anarchy is the secret of power, the empty throne behind the veils of sovereignty; it is the nihilism at the heart of all systems of government. To extract from this a different, more positive figure of anarchy the blind, anarchic operation of power must be revealed and brought to its conclusion.

To understand this, I want to propose a conception of ontological anarchy derived from the Heideggerian thinker, Reiner Schürmann. Schürmann's anarchy principle allows us to grasp both Stirner's and Agamben's insurrectionary approach to ethics and politics more precisely. For Schürmann, the experience of anarchy is a fading away of epochal principles. Unlike in metaphysical thinking, where action has always to be derived from and determined by a first principle - the *arché* - '"anarchy"… always designates the withering away of such a rule, the relaxing of its hold.' (Schürmann 1987, 6) Anarchy is therefore the de-grounding or removing the absolute authority of the *arché* – a form of ontological anti-authoritarianism.

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[2] It should be clear that this notion of insurrection has little to do with the insurrectionary anarchism of Alfredo Bonnano who, while rejecting the revolutionary dogmatism of his anarchist contemporaries in the 1980s, advocated instead forms of violent direct action against the state (see 1988).

However, this experience of anarchy – understood here in terms of indeterminacy, contingency, event – does not, according to Schürmann, make thinking and action impossible. On the contrary, in freeing our experience from the authority of guiding first principles, a certain space is opened up for undetermined, free thought and action. Action is thus freed from its *telos*, from the rule of ends, from the strategic rationality which always sought to determine it.

Something like this anarchy principle is at work, I would suggest, in the post-foundational thinking of Stirner and Agamben. This is particularly resonant in Stirner, who rejects all essences and fixed moral and rational categories as ideological illusions promulgated by a Christianised humanism, and claims to detect, at the heart of every social reality and identity, a fundamental emptiness and absence of being: 'The essence of the world, so attractive and splendid, is for him who looks to the bottom of it – emptiness' (Stirner 1995, 40). Indeed, his whole enterprise of egoistic self-constitution, about which I shall say more in the following section, is founded on a refusal of any positive identity or vocation:

> They say of God, 'names name thee not'. That holds good of me: no *concept* expresses me, nothing that is designated as my essence exhausts me; they are only names. Likewise they say of God that he is perfect and has no calling to strive after perfection. That too holds good of me alone (Stirner 1995, 342).

For Agamben, the positive figure of anarchy that he seeks to extricate from the workings of power, refers to a way of being without foundation and without calling, freed from the governing apparatuses that impose upon us a certain essence and therefore a particular destiny: 'Because human beings neither are nor have to be any essence, any nature, or any specific destiny their condition is the most empty and the most insubstantial of all' (Agamben

2000, 94). Ontological anarchy might be understood, in both thinkers, as an assertion of a form of life – that which Agamben calls the Ungovernable (see 2011, 65) - that escapes, that cannot be expressed or contained within, any fixed identity or *telos*.

Profane politics

The main implication of this ontologically anarchic position, I would argue, is the desacralizing of politics – by which I mean the attempt to dispel the sacred and divine categories that our secular politics remain mired in. Both Agamben and Stirner engage in a critique of the modern project of secularization, revealing its hidden theological dimension. Indeed, Agamben sees secularization as essentially a form of repression: 'It leaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another. Thus the political secularization of theological concepts (the transcendence of God as a paradigm of sovereign power) does nothing but displace the heavenly monarchy onto an earthly monarchy, leaving its power intact' (Agamben 2007, 77).

Let us try to understand exactly what Agamben means by this. The idea that there is a theological remnant within secular political institutions is familiar to us from thinkers like Carl Schmitt (2005) who claimed that *all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.* However, I want to explore this problem at a deeper level through Stirner's critique of secular humanism in *The Ego and Its Own (Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum)*. Here Stirner took issue with the secular and humanist project of his contemporary, Ludwig Feuerbach. In Feuerbach's attempt to displace Christianity and to replace God with Man, Stirner perceived not an insurrection against theology so much as a *theological insurrection* that merely substituted one form of religious alienation and idealism for another: 'the newest revolts against God are nothing but the extremest efforts of "theology", that is, theological insurrections.' (Stirner 1995, 30) Stirner questions the idea of secular emancipation: rather than destroying the categories of religious authority and

alienation, Feuerbach has only inverted the terms and placed the figure of Man within it. The problem is that when God becomes Man, Man himself becomes a new God, thus affirming, rather than removing, the category of the infinite. For Stirner: 'The human *religion* is only the last metamorphosis of the Christian religion' (Stirner 1995, 158). Therefore, according to Stirner, the modern secular consciousness continues to be plagued by religiously-inspired ideas – what Stirner calls 'spooks' - now in a humanist guise, like morality, humanity, truth, and society (1995, 43). These ideas have become absolute and universal, assuming a religious sacredness; this has an alienating effect on the individual subject who seeks his or her own 'essence' and identity within these external ideological categories, and is forced to conform to a moralistic ideal of humanity. This is the same as the effect produced by what Agamben calls 'apparatuses' - abstract paradigms which capture the subject by separating and alienating her from herself: 'All apparatuses of power are always double: they arise, on the one hand, from an individual subjectivizing behaviour and, on the other hand, from its capture in a separate sphere.' (2007, 91)

So the question is, how can this political-theological authority be resisted? As we have seen, secularization only perpetuates its existence and cannot be the answer. An alternative strategy is one of profaning, which is what both thinkers in different ways propose. We must be clear, though, that profanation is not the same as transgression, which, in itself, only reaffirms that which is transgressed.[3] Rather, to profane is to return to its ordinary, everyday place something which had been hitherto removed to a sacred, abstracted place. As Agamben says, profanation is a form of 'negligence' that ignores separation, thereby nullifying the abstract and sacred dimension: 'Profanation… neutralizes what it profanes, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use.' Both

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[3] Stirner argues that crime only reinforces the sanctity of the law by regarding it as something worthy of transgressing (1995: 180-1).

secularization and profanation are political gestures; yet, while secularization perpetuates power by reaffirming the sacred – as we have seen through Stirner's critique of the humanism and liberalism – profanation 'deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized.' (Agamben 2007, 77) We find something very similar in Stirner, where the strategy of 'egoism' is to *consume* the sacred, thereby profaning it:

> But around the altar rise the arches of a church, and its walls keep moving further and further out. What they enclose is sacred. You can no longer get to it, no longer touch it. Shrieking with the hunger that devours you, you wander round about these walls in search of the little that is profane, and the circles of your course keep growing more and more extended. Soon that church will embrace the whole world, and you be driven out to the extreme edge; another step, and the world of the sacred has conquered: you sink into the abyss. Therefore take courage while it is yet time, wander about no longer in the profane where now it is dry feeding, dare the leap, and rush in through the gates into the sanctuary itself. If you devour the sacred, you have made it your own! Digest the sacramental wafer, and you are rid of it! (Stirner 1995, 89)

The egoist seeks out the profane as the last respite from the ever-expanding realm of the sacred. Yet, the only way to preserve the profane is to profane the sacred, to seize hold of it with unhallowed hands, devour it, or, as Agamben would put it, return to common use.

I want to suggest here that profanation, as proposed by both these thinkers, is something like an insurrectionary strategy. Secularism, as we have seen, replaces divine authority with human authority; yet, in doing so, it only reinvents the sacred in a human guise, transposing it onto secular liberal institutions. Ultimately it does nothing to remove the place of divine authority and, in this sense, it might be likened to the instituting power of revolutions. Profanation, on the other hand, seeks to undermine the category of the sacred –

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not by putting something new in its place – but by reclaiming and using the 'objects' normally caught within this category in new and unprecedented ways: Agamben's example is that of reclaiming the law for human use – treating it, as it were, as a plaything – rather than a sacred object endowed with a kind of mystical authority (2005a, 64).[4]

Singularities

The theological dimension which yet persists within modern forms of politics produces certain degraded forms of subjectivity, precisely because it seeks to capture in a separate and sacred domain an essential identity we are required to live up to, and are excluded if we do not. Thus, for Agamben, the continual attempt to separate *bios* from *zoe*, to isolate a dimension of bare life as distinct from politically qualified life, produces forms of disqualified subjectivity – exemplified by the figure of *homo sacer* – which are caught within the sovereign state of exception and are subject to state violence (see Agamben 1998). Indeed, this is an aspect of a more general rationality operating at the heart of modernity, which, according to Agamben, seeks to separate the nonhuman within the human (2004b: 37-8). In projecting a figure of the human, of man, as distinct from the animal – as has been the characteristic gesture of the Western philosophical and indeed political tradition - one ends up simply animalizing man or at least certain kinds of men. A similar point is made by Stirner, who shows that the sacralising of man produces the 'un-man' as the irreducible remainder: 'the un-man is a man who does not correspond to the *concept* man, as the inhuman is something human which is not conformed to the *concept* of the human' (see Stirner 1995, 159).

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[4] Stirner makes a similar point play as a form of profanation: perhaps children make the best use of the Bible itself when they play with it, thus turning it into an ordinary plaything and freeing it from its sacred, absolute dimension such that it has no more power over us (1995, 219).

Is there a way of thinking about subjectivity which avoids this political anthropology and the alienating divisions it imposes? I would argue that both Agamben and Stirner propose an insurrectionary or ontologically anarchic understanding of the subject: a form of subjectivity which is not founded on any essence or firm ontological category, and which is not reducible to any kind of fixed identity; a form of subjectivity without a particular *telos* or destiny which would otherwise bind us to systems of sovereign power. This is what Agamben is proposing with his notion of *form-of-life,* which he defines as 'a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such as naked life'; a life 'for which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself… It defines a life — human life — in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all power.' (Agamben 2000, 2-3).

This profane conception of life, freed from abstractions, and in which the divisions between *bios* and *zoe*, between politically qualified life and bare or natural life, are suspended, finds a surprising parallel with Stirner's peculiar understanding of egoism. Egoism might be understood as a way of living and seeing oneself outside of the humanist abstractions and fixed ideas which otherwise consign us to an alienated existence. So far from implying a simple selfishness, egoism is a singular form of life that is no longer consignable to any generality, be it essence, species, class, citizenship, or even the abstract liberal category of 'the individual'. Rather, the ego (*de einzige*) or, more accurately, the 'unique one', resists all such identities and categories, and is an open, fluid space – a kind of continual becoming without any foundation, essence or destiny: 'I do not presuppose myself, because I am every moment just positing or creating myself, and am I only by being not presupposed but posited, and, again, posited only in the moment when I posit myself' (Stirner 1995, 135).

There is a striking parallel here, I would suggest, between the 'unique one' and Agamben's figure of 'whatever singularity' - an open, undefined subject indifferent to any representable identity, and reducible neither to particularities nor generalities.[5] Moreover, it is the coming together of these open, empty, undefinable singularities which poses an unacceptable threat to the state precisely because they evade the representative channels of state power; Agamben's powerful example here is the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 (see 2000, 85-8), although we could point to more recent examples such as Tahrir Square and Occupy Wall Street. Such convergences of 'whatever singularities' – which signal what Agamben calls 'the coming community' – strongly echo Stirner's enigmatic and seemingly paradoxical notion of the 'union of egoists' (see 1995, 161). The union is a contingent, open form of association which, unlike established political communities - nation, state, political parties and so on - demands no sacrifice of the individual to some collective higher goal or reigning ideology; rather, it is left to be freely determined by those who join.

What is embodied within these various figures of ontologically anarchic subjectivity, then, is the possibility of a non-sovereign politics. In other words, in wanting to free subjectivity from essence, identity and *telos*, Stirner and Agamben point to the possibility of alternative, non-statist and autonomous forms of association and community which are not representable through existing political categories and institutions; which are perhaps – indeed necessarily – vaguely defined, but which open up an alternative insurrectionary horizon for politics.

Passive and active insurrections: inoperativity and ownness

I have characterised the insurrection as a mode of political action which neither seeks power, nor opposes it in any simplistic sense, but which, rather, *profanes* it, suspending its operation

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[5] This similarity has also been noted by Banu Bargu (see 2011, 108).

and fostering instead autonomous relations and forms of subjectivity. Central to this is Agamben's key idea of inoperativeness or *inoperativity*. Inoperativity is a form of activity that is no longer consigned to 'work' and which is freed from any overarching project or *telos*. Indeed, for Agamben, rather than politics being about the strategic pursuit of universal ends, or the fulfilment of a historical destiny – such as liberal-democracy or communism - it is more fundamentally about this 'being-without-work' or the absence of vocation proper to human life (Agamben 2000, 140-1). Yet, to understand this thoroughly we must consider the closely related notion of potentiality which, Agamben argues, is only meaningful if it includes the ontological condition of *impotentiality*. Here his interpretation of Aristotle's *dynamis* emphasises the 'want of potentiality': the potential to do or to be is thus also the potential 'not to be' or 'not to do' (Agamben 1999, 182-3). There is, for Agamben, a radical potentiality and power contained in not acting, a potentiality that is dangerous to governing regimes precisely insofar as it is withheld, suspended, not put to use. At times, simply refusing to act, refusing to be drawn into codified forms of action – even those that ostensibly protest and oppose governing liberal-capitalist regimes – is actually more threatening to these regimes than acting.

The most famous example of this inoperative potentiality provided by Agamben is the enigmatic figure of Bartleby, from Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* (Agamben 1999, 243-274). Bartleby, a law copyist, calmly refuses every request made of him by his increasingly exasperated boss, with the enigmatic phrase 'I would prefer not to' – a simple gesture of passive refusal which throws into disarray the whole structure of workplace authority. Symbolically speaking, this gesture is one of withdrawal or exodus from the system of power rather than active resistance to it. It is not a revolutionary action which constitutes a new set of arrangements, nor is it one of mere opposition; rather it is a gesture of

indifference to power, which at the same time deactivates or disorders it. Bartleby can be seen here as a paradigm of destituent power.

There is a clear parallel here, I believe, with Stirner's notion of 'ownness'. Ownness is Stirner's answer to what he sees as the wholly inadequate forms of freedom available to us today, particularly in liberal regimes where freedom is simply the mode by which we are governed. The problem with freedom is that it is enshrined within a certain normative regime and system of power (the liberal state) such that the more we exercise freedom within these coordinates the more we are inscribed within this regime (Stirner 1995, 145). Therefore, freedom must be left to the 'unique one' to determine for him- or herself. It should be seen as ongoing project of individual autonomy rather than a general political and social goal; freedom as a singular practice, unique to the individual, rather than a universally proclaimed ideal and aspiration. Freedom as a concept is therefore to be profaned - divested of its abstractions and brought down to the level of the ego. Importantly, whereas freedom is something that can be determined and constrained by the state, ownness is something which always remains with individuals: 'My *own* I am at all times and under all circumstances, if I know how to have myself and do not throw myself away on others. To be free is something that I cannot truly *will*, because I cannot make it, cannot create it'. (1995, 143) Echoing Bartleby's serene self-possession, even when finally confined in a prison, Stirner's figure of the slave – although deprived of freedom – still retains his sense of ownness: 'The fetters of reality cut the sharpest welts in my flesh every moment. But my *own* I remain.' (1995, 143) Ownness is therefore a way of thinking about freedom as inoperativity. Rather than seeing freedom as political goal to be achieved, or as the universal destiny of humankind, ownness – as an ontologically anarchic concept – refers to the capacity for freedom that one already has. Bartleby is free in an ontological sense; in his elegant, yet persistent, refusal, he is simply affirming this ungovernability or ownness as the basis of his very being, something which is

always available to him and can never be taken away. In this sense, he lives outside power, as though power did not exist. Bartleby's very existence is ontologically anarchic and might be seen as embodiment of a profound indifference to power. Very much like Stirner's egoist, whose existence is an empty, anarchic space, a 'creative Nothing' (1995, 7) Agamben sees Bartleby as 'the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives; and at the same time, he constitutes the most implacable vindication of this Nothing as pure, absolute potentiality.' (1999, 253-4)

It is at this point, however, that a certain important difference becomes apparent between Stirner and Agamben, and where, I would argue, Stirner's notion of ownness offers a more positive figure of resistance and political action than can be found in Agamben's at times opaque and ambiguous notion of inoperativeness. The problem with Agamben lies not so much in his refusal to appeal to explicit normative categories – indeed, his reticence about proposing alternative modes of political practice reflect in many ways a desire to break decisively with these coordinates – but rather in the passivity implicit in his notion of inoperativeness. It has to be remembered that Bartleby – this paradigmatic figure of resistance – dies of starvation in prison, 'preferring not to' eat. At least for Stirner, the ownness of the slave – with which I have drawn a certain parallel with Bartleby's eerie self-possession - serves as a basis for his active self-emancipation from his master: 'That I then become *free* from him and his whip is only the consequence of my antecedent egoism.' (1995, 143)

The difference between the two thinkers here centres around their alternative approaches to the question of agency. While both propose a non-essentialist or ontologically anarchic understanding of subjectivity, different conceptions of agency nevertheless flow from this. For Agamben, indeterminacy is accompanied by - indeed is understood in terms of – a certain *determinacy*: our absence of destiny and lack of vocation does not mean that we

are free to simply choose our subjectivity, but rather that our lack or vocation *is* our destiny, our calling as human beings. As Agamben puts it, man is 'the Sabbatical animal par excellence' (2011, 246). For Stirner, on the other hand, the fact that our subjectivity is without foundation, essence or calling makes available to us a space of radical freedom and contingency, a freedom to constitute our subjectivity in a multitude of different ways. Put simply, Agamben's ontological anarchism paradoxically reveals a certain anthropological destiny in the structure of the subject – even if this destiny is one of 'worklessness' and inoperativity; hence the importance of messianic time in Agamben's thought (see 2005b). By contrast, Stirner's non-messianic ontological anarchism realises itself in the form of a radical freedom and autonomy – an open space for action, contingency and becoming; the subject here, it might be said, is genuinely anarchic, rather than being determined by any notion of messianic time. These different approaches explain, furthermore, why Agamben is deeply suspicious of the idea of free will and voluntarism (see 2013); whereas Stirner, while acknowledging the highly ambiguous meaning of freedom under liberalism, at the same time proposes a much more radical notion of self-ownership and autonomy, from which springs the potential for egoistic self-emancipation. Both theorists propose an indifference to power, yet this is understood in different ways and has different political consequences: for Agamben, this would seem to translate into the sort of radical, yet ultimately self-sacrificial, passivity exemplified by Bartleby, who is indifferent not only to the external conditions around him but also, in a sense, to his self, to his own life. For Stirner, on the other hand, as we shall see below, indifference to power translates into an affirmation of the self and a capacity for autonomous action. Yet, while these are important differences, they emerge, I would suggest, from a shared understanding of the subject as a being without essential foundation or identity. Moreover, while one might be tempted to regard Stirner's more willful notion of agency being insufficiently removed from the revolutionary paradigm of constituent

power, his theory of insurrection, at least on my reading, makes it clear that the individual does not seek to constitute a new form of power or will a new form of society, but rather simply wills him or herself. Once again, it is not an armed rising 'but a rising of individuals, a getting up without regard to the *arrangements* that spring from it.'

Of course, many important questions remain concerning political organisation and community. Indeed, the very question of community marks a further difference between these two thinkers: Stirner starts with the individual egoist and is suspicious of all forms of collective organisation, apart from those freely determined by the individual him- or herself – I have already made reference to the 'union of egoists', which is a contingent political space formed by individual egoists for their own ends. Agamben, on the other hand, starts with the question of the community, seeking to rethink it as a space for new forms of inoperative life – hence his interest in the 'coming political community' of stateless people (1996, 158-164) or in the rule-bound life of monastic communities (2013). Yet, as different as these perspectives are, they share a concern with modes of interaction and association which are autonomous from established and abstracted forms of political community – namely the sovereign state - in which the subject is coercively included, or, as Agamben would have it, included in the form of a potential exclusion (1998).

Conclusion

The opaqueness of these formulations no doubt makes them difficult to apply in any sort of direct way to contemporary social and political movements – and perhaps it is asking too much to do so. If one is looking for a program of political organisation or action in Stirner and Agamben's writing, then one will be disappointed. Moreover, in seeking in these thinkers an insurrectionary political ontology which can shed some light on our contemporary political horizon, does not mean that one can be blind to the important differences between particular movements and radical political struggles, which might emerge in very different contexts. To

say that, for instance, in Occupy Wall Street and Tahrir Square one could find examples of destituent and insurrectionary forms of politics – in the way I have theorised - does not mean, of course, that they were the same, or that people in these situations mobilised around the same issues and concerns. Rather, my claim has been that in the modes of interaction and organisation characteristic of many such movements – in their decentralised structures, their largely spontaneous mobilisation, their non-representative forms of political expression (see della Porta ?) – one can find a new form of post-sovereign politics that does not seek hegemony within state institutions – either in a reformist or revolutionary sense - but rather seeks to cultivate autonomous forms political association and life. I have sought to understand this through the idea of insurrection, which I have developed with reference to the ontologically anarchic thinking of Stirner and Agamben. As I have argued, the insurrection is a destitution of political power: it seeks to suspend - rather than destroy and reinstitute - governing political power, thereby opening up autonomous spaces in the social landscape in which alternative forms of subjectivity, association and political practices can emerge. As we have seen, insurrection involves a certain profaning of established political concepts, such as sovereignty, representation, political agency.

The key concepts I have explored - of ownness, inoperativity, singularity, ontological anarchy and indeed the insurrection itself - may at first seem unfamiliar to the usual categories of political theory. Yet, they are intended to resist the traps of sovereign power, and therefore cannot be assimilated to any sort of hegemonic project. Indeed, they are intended precisely to destabilise and profane many of the familiar normative coordinates of politics. However, I have argued that such a profanation is necessary if we are to adequately comprehend the new forms of post-sovereign political activism and mobilisation we are seeing increasingly around us today.

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