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Democratizing Revolution

Self-Reflexivity and Self-Limitation Beyond Liberalism

Robin Celikates

For almost two decades after 1989/90 it seemed to many in the West that "we" are living in a postrevolutionary era – and indeed, political thought was dominated by a reformist mindset for which radical ambitions betrayed a naïve, outdated, and excessive desire. However, since the "movements of the squares" – the "Arab Spring," Occupy in its different instantiations, Istanbul's Gezi park protest, Black Lives Matter, and the Ni una menos movement – radical social and political transformation is back on the agenda. This is not surprising given the "new normal" of manifold and interlocking crises and catastrophes – from structural racism via the neoliberal destruction of social infrastructures to environmental apocalypse. Against this bleak background, the desire for radical change appears as significantly more realistic than the standard defenses of the status quo that rest on phantasies of self-sufficiency and denials of relational entanglement.

Whether this shift amounts to a return of revolutionary politics, or whether these movements should rather be seen as decidedly postrevolutionary, is a question that will not be decided with reference to "the facts." Rather, the corresponding discussions can serve as a reminder that struggles around the concept of revolution are central to the trajectories of radical political thought after Marx – for whom "to be radical is to grasp things by the root"[1] – and to the contested self-understanding of contemporary societies. As a concept that is not only contested but plays an irreducible role in contestations, revolution is precisely

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[1] Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 60.

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located at the intersection of radical political thought, societal self-understandings, and practices of resistance.[2] Like other contested concepts – what, in German, one would call 'Kampfbegriffe', or concepts deployed as weapons in a struggle[3] – the concept of revolution is bound up with a series of dichotomies that seem to require taking sides: voluntarism or determinism, spontaneity or organization, agency or structure, tendency or event, permanence or rupture, violence or nonviolence, etc. Confronting rather than denying the fundamental ambivalences and ambiguities of both the concept and the practice of revolution, however, requires us to understand these dichotomies as giving rise to tensions that are as irreducible as they are essential for both concept and practice.

In what follows, I argue that it is precisely in a constant oscillation between the above-mentioned poles – and in the impossibility of determination – that the specific negativity of revolutions and their potential for radical-democratic practice today can be located.[4] In order to retain this potential, evidenced in contemporary movements and struggles, we need to move beyond homogenizing and nationalist-populist understandings of both revolution and democracy and the notion of popular sovereignty or constituent power that often underlies them. The homogenizing logic inherent in the quest for determination risks denying the irreducible tensions, arresting the productive oscillation and thereby jeopardizing the radical-democratic potential of revolutionary politics. Against this background, one way to avoid reproducing the exclusions and hierarchies that continue to haunt many attempts to reactivate radical politics today, especially in the register of hegemony, is to pluralize the idea and practice of revolutions. Revolutionary practice is thus confronted with the need to look for ways to preserve its internal heterogeneity and ambivalence against the urge of homogenizing its subject. Its own processual character needs to be kept open against the temptations of closure. And we need to defend the revolutionary and democratic potential of the apparently marginal – as exemplified, amongst others, in the struggles of migrants and Indigenous people(s) today – against hierarchizing reinscriptions of what counts as properly political or revolutionary, or who counts as the proper political or revolutionary subject. This perspective allows us to see that revolutionary practices are essentially practices of enacting radical democracy "here and now."

[2] See, for example, Ariella Azoulay, "Revolution," *Political Concepts* 2 (2013): www.politicalconcepts.org/revolution-ariella-azoulay; Asef Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017); Rebecca L. Spang, "How Revolutions Happen," *The Atlantic*, July 4, 2020, www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/revolution-doesnt-look-like-revolution/613801.

[3] For an influential perspective on this role of concepts, see Reinhart Koselleck, "Begriffsgeschichte und Sozialgeschichte," in *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1995), 111.

[4] See, for example, Etienne Balibar, "The Idea of Revolution: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," *ΑΡΙΑΔΝΗ* 22 (2015–16): 228–44.

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Building on ideas experimentally developed in the long and troubled history of revolutionary practice and elaborated in the works of Hannah Arendt, Cornelius Castoriadis, and others, I argue that indeterminacy – or, rather, the constant process of dismantling determinacy and of preserving indeterminacy – and the self-reflexivity this process requires can be seen as two important features of revolutionary practice. They will not only allow for a more adequate understanding of past revolutions and their ambiguities, but also for a fuller comprehension of the democratic potential and risks of revolutionary action in the present. A radical-democratic and revolutionary remaking of the demos needs to start from those political struggles that call for a radical revision, pluralization, and deterritorialization of the demos, of peoplehood and of its internal and external borders. In the contemporary constellation, migrant and Indigenous struggles and movements in my view provide important lessons for the theory of revolution despite the differences between them and their internal heterogeneity. As I argue, these movements deeply unsettle the existing terms of the struggle for hegemony rather than making a move within its narrowly nationalist-populist confines (a similar argument could be made with reference to antiracist and anticolonial struggles). Attention to the ways in which they enact democracy will provide an important counterweight to the incapacitating co-optation of revolution into the realm of the "to come." My hope is that in the process the contours of a new – grounded and pluralist – understanding of revolution will emerge that does not subordinate the radical-democratic practices in the "here and now" to some future project, but, rather, grounds revolution precisely in this "here and now."

POLITICAL, NOT METAPHYSICAL

It is a long-standing topos of the conservative critique of revolution that the very idea of revolution as well as the practice it inspires is anachronistic, romantic, quixotic, politically dangerous, and deeply metaphysical. In this vein, Edmund Burke famously diagnosed the French revolutionaries as suffering from "much, but bad metaphysics."[5] As Albert Hirschman has demonstrated, the rhetoric of reaction that unfolds in the wake of revolutions and seeks to preempt their success and recurrence is structured around a threefold accusation: revolutionary ambitions are naïve and in vain, their consequences endanger reformist achievements we should hold on to, and they lead to a perverse reversal of the intentions that motivate them.[6] Against this background, there

[5] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 154; see also Christoph Menke, *Reflections of Equality* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), ix.

[6] See Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

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are at least three types of reasons for retaining and foregrounding the concept of revolution and defending it against the suspicion that all these supposed deficiencies are due to a metaphysical and therefore genuinely antipolitical desire for total upheaval.

First, as noted, our time is characterized by multiple interlocking and mutually reinforcing systemic crises and an increasingly widespread realization of their (often historically deep) destructive effects. This realization encompasses a growing sense that even political and social achievements that have long been regarded as irreversible in parts of the Western world – achievements usually secured at the expense of exploited, dominated, and abandoned populations elsewhere and at home – are, as a matter of fact, fragile, reversible, and subject to an orchestrated roll-back that unites neoliberal and authoritarian agendas.[7] Against this background, there are obvious *political* reasons for a perspective of radical political transformation beyond the longue durée of social learning processes, the micropolitics of local initiatives, the organized but domesticated world of NGO activism, and the reformist remnants of formerly left-wing political parties. The current convergence between anticapitalist, promigrant, and climate and racial justice struggles and movements, despite continuing conflicts and misunderstandings, attests to the resilient and emerging potentialities of such a radical perspective.[8]

Second, there are *historical* reasons for inscribing current struggles in the fragmented continuum of past emancipation movements. The preserving and potentially redemptive commemoration of defeated and lost revolutions needs to be defended against the escalating counterrevolutionary politics of memory driven by the often cruel and vindictive attempts of modern states to erase all traces of previous attempts to challenge their authority.[9] Far from being merely symbolic, this seemingly irrational mnemonic violence seeks to silence the potentially revolutionary memory of revolutions as well as neutralize the hopes and mobilizing potential associated with it. Understanding their own practice as part of a revolutionary tradition can, in contrast, enable movements to overcome short-termism, broaden possibilities of solidarity, and develop more radical political horizons.

Third, on a *philosophical* level, one can argue that the idea and practice of revolution, far from being metaphysical, can develop a distinctly antimetaphysical potential, since they owe their own conditions of possibility to the contestedness, underdetermination, and contingency of the social and

[7] See, for example, Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

[8] See, for example, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016); Amna A. Akbar, "The Left Is Remaking Politics," *The New York Times*, July 12, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/07/11/opinion/sunday/defund-police-cancel-rent.html.

[9] See Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

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political order. At the same time, this contestedness, underdetermination, and contingency is revealed through revolutions as they interrupt and break open an order that seemed without alternative, unbreakable.

Following from this final point, at first glance the negativity of revolutions may seem to be primarily, or even exclusively, located in this negation of the existing order, in the rejection of its claim to obedience, and the liberation from its coercive embrace. Surely, revolutions are inconceivable without the determinate negation of the status quo – and of the suffering and injustice it produces structurally and not merely contingently. Taking a closer look at the practice and theory of revolution, however, reveals that revolutions are more than mere interruptions and go beyond breaking with the existing order. The revolutionary dynamic is generative and exceeds the logic of insurrection and revolt, although both are entangled in complex genealogies and trajectories of reversal and inflection. As Glen Coulthard puts it:

> Forms of Indigenous resistance, such as blockading and other explicitly disruptive oppositional practices, are indeed reactive in the ways that some have critiqued, but they are also very important. Through these actions we physically say "no" to the degradation of our communities and to exploitation of the lands upon which we depend. But they also have ingrained within them a resounding "yes": they are the affirmative enactment of another modality of being, a different way of relating to and with the world, . . . a way of life, another form of community.[10]

Cornelius Castoriadis makes a similar point when he insists that, beyond the break, transformative politics is revolutionary insofar as it is "animated by an overall will and an overall aim," namely "to modify the social institutions 'from top to bottom'."[11] It is this "enactment" or "institution" of an alternative political reality that distinguishes the very idea and practice of revolution from that of revolt. For Castoriadis, this project of self-institution is an open-ended and reflexive process that he sees as incompatible with the phantasy of a fully self-transparent and self-identical individual or collective subject ("self").[12] Accordingly, the negativity of revolutions goes beyond determinate negation and encompasses the process of transformation itself. Since the tensions built into the very concept of revolution make a positive and

[10] Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 169.

[11] Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Revolutionary Exigency," in *Political and Social Writings*, vol. 3, *1961–1979*, ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 239.

[12] For the corresponding notion of autonomy as tied to the open-ended process of self-questioning and the need for a self-reflexive form of self-institution, see Cornelius Castoriadis, "Power, Politics, Autonomy," in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 143–74. Indeed, Castoriadis identifies the "syllogism . . . : the revolution intends the transparency of society; a transparent society is impossible; therefore, the revolution is impossible (or is possible only as totalitarianism)" as the effect of an obsessive misrecognition of the very practice of revolution. Castoriadis, "The Revolutionary Exigency," 230.

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unambiguous determination of revolutions – of their possibility, their beginning, their course, their end, their success and failure, their subject, their terrain – impossible, we can speak of a specific negativity of revolutions. This negativity constantly urges revolutionary politics to relate to itself – that is, to become self-reflexive – in practice, and to work to preserve rather than overcome its own heterogeneity.[13]

It is well known that Hannah Arendt linked the radically transformative potential of revolutionary political practice to the fact that revolutions can be seen as "the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning."[14] They exemplify political action, itself the privileged expression of the fundamental agential ability to make a new beginning. In order to counter the risk of hypostatizing the idea of a new beginning, it should be understood in a pluralist fashion (in part against Arendt's own intentions) as encompassing different ways of making a new beginning or of beginning again, of affirmatively enacting another modality of being (to return to Coulthard's formulation) that may, as in the case of many Indigenous struggles, have deep historical roots. Against this background, revolutions are beginnings primarily in the sense that they instantiate and enable new forms of acting together, aiming to establish an order that institutionalizes, or at least aims or claims to institutionalize, the "spirit of the revolution." As Christoph Menke puts it,

> the revolution does not only transform individual conditions and institutions, it rather changes how there are conditions and institutions – because it converts them into our deeds, the revolution begins a new, different history. The revolution is not the solution to any kind of crisis. It is nothing but a new commencement of a history in which there are new commencements. The revolution begins beginning.[15]

On my understanding, this kind of beginning can and does often involve recovering, resurging, and renewing traditional ways of being and acting with others that have been sidelined, suppressed, and destroyed by the modern state.

The fundamentally antimetaphysical character of revolutions is expressed in the fact that as collective acts of beginning anew, of beginning again, they practically articulate a basic insight of political ontology: While it may become especially evident in revolutionary situations that power is lying in the streets waiting to be picked up,[16] ultimately all regimes depend on the

[13] See Christoph Menke, "The Possibility of Revolution," *Crisis and Critique* 4, no. 2 (2017): 312–22.

[14] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1990), 21; see also Oliver Marchart, *Neu Beginnen: Hannah Arendt, die Revolution und die Globalisierung* (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2005).

[15] Menke, "The Possibility of Revolution," 320. Accordingly, in order to be adequate to the "postrevolutionary" situation, the very meaning of concepts such as "order" and "principle" would have to be revised.

[16] See Arendt, *On Revolution*, 48, 116.

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recognition of those who are subject to them because they could not, in the long run, maintain themselves based on violence alone. This is the fundamental point articulated in the young Marx's claim that democracy is "the solved riddle of all constitutions," as it is the only form of politically organizing society that gives institutional expression to the fact that the state, the constitution, and the law find their "actual basis" in the social and political practices of the actual demos.[17]

In addition, during revolutions, those framing or background conditions of political action that usually remain unquestioned and are accepted as given suddenly become problematized and politicized: They are revealed as contingent and subject to transformative political practices.[18] The new beginning, or beginning again, the founding or refounding marked by revolutions is thus a form of joint action that makes new forms of joint political action possible, a form of "acting in concert" (as Arendt says, with a term borrowed from Burke[19]) that aims at self-determination. Before the revolution, insofar as it makes sense to conceive of politics as self-determination or self-institution at all, it is a severely constrained practice, one that is subject to conditions it cannot fully understand and therefore is not in a position to reflect upon or to recognize as changeable. Again, the point is not to overburden revolutions with the hubris of total self-institution, which is, after all, another metaphysical fantasy. Rather, it is to emphasize that in their process, and as a result of collective political agency, revolutions can dramatically transform what people regard and treat as changeable and unchangeable. When theorists try to capture this dynamic (rather than explain it away or ignore it), they often resort to relatively metaphorical language. Think of the empowering collective experience of overcoming fear and what Hannah Arendt called the joy of acting together, or Jean-Paul Sartre's theoretical narrative of the storming of the Bastille, which would later become the beginning of the French Revolution, in terms of the "groupe en fusion," or invocations of the spirit of the revolution (e.g. in its incarnation as the "spirit of Gezi").[20]

[17] Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Tucker, 21; see also Miguel Abensour, *Democracy Against the State* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

[18] See, for example, Bini Adamczak, *Beziehungsweise Revolution: 1917, 1968 und kommende* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017), 100.

[19] Hannah Arendt, "Freiheit und Politik," in *Zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft: Übungen im politischen Denken I* (Munich: Piper, 2000), 224 (this passage is not included in the English version).

[20] See Arendt, *On Revolution*, 279; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, vol. 1, *Théorie des ensembles pratiques, précédé de Questions de méthode* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 391–94; and Serhat Karakayalı and Özge Yaka, "The Spirit of Gezi: The Recomposition of Political Subjectivities in Turkey," *New Formations* 83 (2014): 117–38.

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In order to counteract the risk of self-subversion, of subjecting their potential to deeply unsettle the existing terms of the struggle for hegemony to the relative certainties of making a move within its narrowly state-centered confines, revolutions thus need to counter the temptation to install unquestionable commitments or determinations that are removed from further political contestation. In this, revolutions are radically democratic: the revolutionary process is one without metaphysical foundations – that is, it is a process that ultimately cannot be founded in or justified by reference to God, human nature, the course of history, science, or truth, even if in their beginnings revolutions often only get off the ground if they can tap into the ideological and motivational resources offered by such foundations and even if the invocation of foundational certainties continues to haunt them.

Both revolutionary and democratic practices articulate the same radical – and radically antimetaphysical – insight: Political orders and communities are never simply given and to be accepted, but both the result and the continuing terrain of political practices of contestation and transformation, of cooperation and self-organization. As they make the very form of politics and society changeable,[21] the negativity of both democracy and revolution is thus due to the absence of a stable foundation, of a univocal logic that would yield substantial orientations, and of clearly demarcated boundaries: Essentially conflictual and indeterminate, in order not to subvert their own logic and potential both require a permanent struggle to keep open the possibility of self-revision in the "here and now." Therefore, both lead to an essentially open-ended process of democratization and revolutionization that – despite its necessary directedness and contextuality – not only keeps the social and political order but also democracy and revolution themselves from ever achieving closure.

In addition to the ability of initiating a new beginning or of beginning anew, this also points to the second aspect in which revolutions resist their metaphysical (self-)misunderstanding: their processuality and plurality. No doubt, the metaphysical misunderstanding often appears in the guise of a self-misunderstanding. This can take the form of the mythological, fetishistic idea of the revolution as a total, all-encompassing break that can be organized and controlled in the name of a homogeneous revolutionary subject, and that leads to a completely new, rationally established, and self-transparent social order beyond all antagonisms and contestations.[22] Tendencies of fetishistic self-mythologization might be at work in all historical examples of revolution, but in many of them the problematic nature of these tendencies and the need to the struggle over and against this mythologization have also been recognized. In

[21] See Christoph Menke, *Critique of Rights* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 224; Cornelius Castoriadis, "Does the Idea of Revolution Still Make Sense?," *Thesis Eleven* 26 (1990): 123–38.

[22] See, for example, Ernesto Laclau, "Beyond Emancipation," in *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), 1–19.

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counteracting these tendencies to (self-)mythologize, the pluralization of the idea and practice of revolution must operate on different levels. It needs to account for the plurality of political terrains and conflicts, of political actors and subjects, and of practices, strategies, and tactics at work in revolutions. These different levels stand in a complex and sometimes contradictory relationship to one another, opening up an internal heterogeneity that can be substantial, spatial, and temporal (and all at the same time), and that regularly gives rise to a powerful desire to ensure the unity and univocality of revolutions by means of one-sided determinations. Ultimately following a statist logic, such a "becoming-state" of revolutions goes hand in hand with suppressing their own internal heterogeneity and ambivalence. This heterogeneity and ambivalence is often tied to the multiple "revolutions within the revolution" that harbor alternative emancipatory pathways – such as, in the case of the French Revolution, the revolutions of women, the enslaved people of Haiti, and the poor, and their neglected legacies of insurgent universality.[23] Against the centralist urge of top-down unification and the risk of "becoming-state," revolutions must in practice experimentally invent and secure ways of preserving their polyvalence, indetermination, and openness.[24]

Because of their essential heterogeneity and indeterminacy, revolutions thus need to be understood as complex processes in which heterogeneous logics, dynamics, temporalities, and forms of practice are inextricably intertwined. As a result, processuality and plurality become essential characteristics of revolutionary acting-in-concert rather than temporary weaknesses that need to be straightened out or merely contingent aspects that are only of accidental importance.[25]

SELF-REFLEXIVITY, SELF-LIMITATION, AND THE LIMITS OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION

In their quest for certainty, for avoiding and suppressing misunderstandings, and for bringing the revolution to a "successful" end, revolutionary movements themselves risk reproducing structural features of the very power relations against which they turn. Revolutions therefore need to find ways to account for the counterrevolutionary risks emerging from within themselves. In order to counteract these self-undermining tendencies, revolutions need to and can develop – and in fact have developed – revolutionary practices and forms of organization that not only allow for internal plurality, processuality, and complexity, rather than suppressing them, but that politically reflect, sustain,

[23] See Massimiliano Tomba, *Insurgent Universality: An Alternative Legacy of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), chp. 2.

[24] See, for example, Adamczak, *Beziehungsweise Revolution*, 67.

[25] See, for example, Daniel Loick, "21 Theses on the Politics of Forms of Life," *Theory & Event* 20, no. 3 (2017): 800–1.

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and strengthen these characteristics. To do this, revolutions have to become self-reflexive without postulating a unitary self. For Arendt, this includes renouncing the phantasm of sovereignty and accepting that the "virtuosity" of acting together with others, which is essential for revolutions, is only possible under conditions of nonsovereignty.[26] It also includes, in Judith Butler's words, a form of "reflexive self-making," a recognition that "democratic politics has to be concerned with who counts as 'the people,' how the demarcation is enacted that brings to the fore who 'the people' are and that consigns to the background, to the margin, or to oblivion those people who do not count as 'the people'."[27] Insofar as it continues to make sense to speak of a subject, a self, here, it is one for which relationality and interdependency are constitutive and, as a result, the boundaries between self and other are blurred.

In addition, revolutionary processes have a logic of their own and their unpredictability and uncontrollability – in the strong sense that leads Arendt to speak of a "miracle"[28] – often impose themselves on their revolutionary subjects, transforming the nature of their collective agency. In this transformation, any claim to organize or "make" revolutions in a top-down fashion thus comes to appear as a historically momentous category mistake. The mistake lies in conceptualizing revolutionary action – a praxis, in the Aristotelian sense – according to the model of poiesis. If this happens, revolutionary practices are subjected to technological control, disciplined, and cut off from the "spirit of revolution."[29] Precisely as political practice, and insofar as they are practice, revolutions stand in contradiction to the myth of total controllability on the basis of privileged insight or scientifically founded certainty, which is often foisted upon them – admittedly not only by its opponents.

Against this background, it seems too simple to interpret Arendt's distinction of two stages of revolutions – liberation and foundation, or constitution – as a sequence of negative and positive forms of political practice. Just as liberation requires "positive" or constitutive forms of acting together and of collective organization, (re)foundation and (re)constitution must embrace and structurally incorporate elements of negativity: forms of self-reflexivity and self-limitation. The self-limitation in question does not coincide with the liberal call

[26] Arendt, *On Revolution*, 213; see also Hannah Arendt, "Freedom and Politics," *Chicago Review* 14, no. 1 (1960): 40–41.

[27] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 5, 171.

[28] Arendt, "Freedom and Politics," 44–45. Arendt's emphasis on the unpredictable character of revolutionary action contrasts starkly with Herbert Marcuse's quasi-utilitarian "historical calculus" embedded in the "inhuman arithmetic of history" that has justified sacrifice throughout history and is supposed to guide the revolutionaries in their cause. Herbert Marcuse, "Ethics and Revolution," in *Ethics and Society: Original Essays on Contemporary Moral Problems*, ed. R. T. de George (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1966), 140, 145.

[29] Arendt, *On Revolution*, 224.

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for unambiguous – clearly determinable – moral constraints on political action (such as catalogues of presumably extra-political human rights). Rather, and in contrast to liberalism, the self-reflexivity and self-limitation in question arise precisely from the internal logic of revolutionary acting-in-concert itself and connect to its – always politically precarious – indeterminacy, openness, and processuality.

In Arendt's view, acting-in-concert, if it is to achieve anything, remains dependent, even in its execution, on freedom being constantly reactivated, on beginnings, as it were, constantly flowing anew into sequences of action that have been begun in the past.[30] This holds for revolutions as well. As Castoriadis puts it: "The form of the revolution and of postrevolutionary society is not an institution or an organization given once and for all, but the *activity* of self-organization, or self-institution."[31] That its form is this activity means that institution and organization must take on another form – one determined, or rather, interrupted in its determinations, by negativity and self-reflexivity.

Within the horizon of modernity, one of the historically most significant examples of the attempt to institutionalize, in a self-reflexive and at the same time open way, the "spirit of the revolution" can be found in "the communes, the councils, the Räte, the soviets."[32] In Arendt's view, they are "the only form of government to develop directly out of the spirit of the revolution."[33] This "amazing formation of a new power structure which owed its existence to nothing but the organizational impulses of the people themselves" confronted the professional revolutionaries with "the rather uncomfortable alternative of either putting their own pre-revolutionary 'power', that is, the organization of the party apparatus, into the vacated power centre of the defunct government, or simply joining the new revolutionary power centres which had sprung up without their help."[34] According to Arendt, it is no coincidence that the radical-democratic power of the councils, communes, and soviets emerges in virtually all revolutions, before it is crushed, co-opted, or taken over by the party or the newly established state apparatus.[35] Even the Hungarian

[30] See Arendt, *On Revolution*, 224. [31] Castoriadis, "The Revolutionary Exigency," 238.

[32] Arendt, *On Revolution*, 256. Here we can note a convergence with Jim Tully's nonsovereign view of civic citizenship; see, for example, Adam Dunn and David Owen, "Instituting Citizenship," in James Tully, *On Global Citizenship: James Tully in Dialogue* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 247–65.

[33] Hannah Arendt, *Über die Revolution* (Munich: Piper 1994), 327 (this passage is not included in the English version, translation author's own) – whether "form of government" is the right term here would have to be debated.

[34] Arendt, *On Revolution*, 257.

[35] On the communist party take-over of the soviets during the "October Revolution," see Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *L'ombre d'octobre: La révolution russe et le spectre des soviets* (Montreal: Lux, 2017); on its ambivalent legacy, see Michael Hardt and Sandro Mezzadra, eds., "October! The Soviet Centenary," special issue, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 4 (2017).

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Revolution of 1956, celebrated by Arendt as the first example of Rosa Luxemburg's "spontaneous revolution" – "this sudden uprising of an oppressed people for the sake of freedom and hardly anything else"[36] – is of interest to her primarily as a resurrection of the council system buried by the "October Revolution."

Many of the social and political struggles and movements of the last ten years may not be revolutions in Arendt's or Castoriadis' sense, and the assemblies in public squares and occupied buildings may not be classic councils. Nevertheless, the work of both suggests that the "spirit of the revolution" is often kept alive in political practices that may at first glance not necessarily seem revolutionary. These practices are part of a continuum that includes occupations, strikes and walk-outs, protest encampments, noncooperation, civil disobedience, and uprisings, all of which can be seen as attempts to enact radical democracy "here and now." For example, following Arendt, but turning against her own exclusion of racialized political subjects from the realm of civil disobedience, the radical-democratic potential of this political practice can be highlighted. It then appears as articulating the "power of the people," the "potestas in populo," in a way that actualizes the horizontal social contract by opening up a space of indeterminacy in which politics in the potentially revolutionary sense can emerge in the first place.[37] Similarly, assemblies, just as councils, can be seen as carrying the promise and prefiguring the reality of a "plurality of powers" that allows for "equal access" and keeps the democratic process open to its own "democratic excess."[38] As Verónica Gago argues with reference to the feminist strike and Ni una menos:

> The feminist movement takes to the streets and constructs itself in assemblies; it weaves together its potencia in territories and elaborates a comprehensive analysis of the conjuncture; it produces a counterpower that is able to win new rights while retaining its focus on a more radical horizon. In short: our movement dismantles the binary between reform and revolution.[39]

[36] Hannah Arendt, "Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution," *The Journal of Politics* 20, no. 1 (1958): 8. For a similar assessment, see Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Hungarian Source," in *Political and Social Writings*, vol. 3, 250–72; and Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Proletarian Revolution Against the Bureaucracy," in *Political and Social Writings*, vol. 2, *1955–1960*, ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 57–89.

[37] Hannah Arendt, "Civil Disobedience," in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1972), 86–87; see also Robin Celikates, "Radical Democratic Disobedience," in *Cambridge Companion to Civil Disobedience*, ed. William Scheuerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 128–52. On the deeply problematic politics of race that structures Arendt's account, see, for example, Ayça Çubukçu, "Of Rebels and Disobedients: Reflections on Arendt, Race, Lawbreaking," *Law and Critique* 32 (2021): 33–50.

[38] Tomba, *Insurgent Universality*, 67.

[39] Verónica Gago, *Feminist International: How to Change Everything* (London: Verso, 2020), 241–42.

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Similarly aiming to establish a revolutionary continuum rather than an exceptionalism of the revolution, the notion of prefigurative politics not only turns away from privileging the aim of conquering power (or the struggle for hegemony), but also articulates a fundamental critique of the authoritarian and vanguardist traditions of the left from within. Far from abandoning its revolutionary ambitions, this is in fact an attempt to rescue them from statist capture, organizational ossification, and metaphysical hypostatization. As evidenced in the movements of the squares across the globe, political practices are prefigurative in attempting to realize what they strive for in the future in an anticipatory mode in the here and now – above all in horizontal and participatory, inclusive and solidary organizational structures and practices. In so doing, they come to regard ends and means, goals and processes, as standing in a relationship of mutual determination that is always in need of experimental revision and readjustment.[40] A similarly prefigurative logic seems to be at work in many Indigenous struggles for self-determination that do not primarily see it as an institutional goal to be demanded from and granted by the state or another authority, as part of an aspiration to become like a state. Rather, these struggles seem to aim at and enact an alternative, nonhegemonic, ethical-political practice of "self-determination from below," as part of a long-term and often subterranean struggle that seeks to transform power relations rather than appropriate predetermined positions within such relations.[41] In this transformation the very meaning of land rights, control over resources, and governance – all central elements of self-determination in Indigenous struggles – is at stake and reconfigured beyond its hegemonic configuration. It is therefore no surprise that in his reconstruction of the long history of Indigenous struggle Nick Estes prominently references Marx's figure of the revolution as the burrowing mole: "Hidden from view to outsiders, this constant tunneling, plotting, planning, harvesting, remembering, and conspiring for freedom – the collective faith that another world is possible – is the most important aspect of revolutionary work."[42] More precisely, it is in enacting another world that revolutionary political action demonstrates the possibility of another world.

Both the councils foregrounded by Arendt and the various politics of prefiguration from the recent past can be seen as attempts to enact and institutionalize negativity and self-reflexivity, which are at the same time

[40] See, for example, Paul Raekstad, "Revolutionary Practice and Prefigurative Politics: A Clarification and Defense," *Constellations* 25, no. 3 (2018): 359–72; and Mathijs van de Sande, "Fighting with Tools: Prefiguration and Radical Politics in the Twenty-First Century," *Rethinking Marxism* 27 (2015): 177–94.

[41] See Jakeet Singh, "Recognition and Self-Determination: Approaches from Above and Below," in *Recognition versus Self-Determination: Dilemmas of Emancipatory Politics*, ed. Avigail Eisenberg et al. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 62–7.

[42] Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London: Verso, 2019), 19.

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aware of the limits of institutionalization. They therefore try to find forms of acting-in-concert that are not merely situational and that make it possible for "beginnings" to constantly flow anew into what has once been begun. Both also exemplify another – neither necessary nor arbitrary – implication of the negativity and self-reflexivity of revolution: a form of self-limitation of revolutionary action that is again not liberal (i.e. grounded in prior rights or referring to a status quo ante), but radical or radical-democratic. Far from mandating nonviolence in an absolutist sense, this form of self-limitation manifests itself in a troubled and ambivalent relationship to violence, which also sets itself apart from the instrumentalism of influential classical conceptions of revolution.

A striking example of such classical conceptions is provided by the polemic realism of Friedrich Engels's characterization of the revolution as "certainly the most authoritarian thing there is," as an "act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannons – authoritarian means, if such there be at all."[43] In stark contrast, an alternative tradition of self-limiting (but not necessarily for this reason nonviolent or postrevolutionary) revolution has emerged that stretches from the anarchist and feminist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries via the South African ANC and the Polish Solidarność to, amongst others, the movements of the squares, BLM, and the feminist strike. This alternative tradition consciously positions itself against hegemonic friend–enemy logics – prominently exemplified in the antipopulist refusal of discourses of othering ("ötekileştirme") in Gezi Park.[44] It also rejects statist fantasies of sovereignty, and ultimately antipolitical and demobilizing attempts at a centralist reduction of the complexity or contingency of revolutionary practice.[45] Insofar as this reorientation does problematize violence as a means of achieving revolutionary goals – in contrast to a line that leads from Engels via Lukacs to Marcuse[46] – it is neither an external or top-down counterrevolutionary critique of subversive violence, nor a purely strategic recommendation, nor a principled – for instance, ethically justified – rejection of the use of violence under all circumstances (including, say, self-defense). Rather, this self-limitation is grounded in a certain understanding of political and revolutionary practice – in a thoroughly practical act of self-reflection – which builds on the

[43] Friedrich Engels, "On Authority," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Tucker, 733.

[44] Karakayalı and Yaka, "The Spirit of Gezi," 128.

[45] See, for example, Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 72–4. From this perspective, recent attempts to ascribe to the party once again a revolutionary role and to contrast it with a supposedly otherwise disoriented and dispersed nature of the crowd should be met with skepticism. See, for example, Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (London: Verso, 2016).

[46] On the complex but ultimately one-sided theorization of violence in Marxism, see Etienne Balibar, "Reflections on Gewalt," *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory* 17 (2009): 99–125.

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antivoluntarist historical experience and sociological insight that violence can neither be easily overcome nor controlled and that it fundamentally threatens the collective enactment of democracy in the "here and now."[47] As a result, one can neither simply step away from violence nor embrace it in order to use it in a measured way. Rather, revolutionary practices and forms of organization need to find ways to counter the reality and dynamics of violence with a radical politics of civility, understood here as the collective capacity to act within conflicts and upon them, transforming them from excessively violent to less violent ones.[48]

Consequently, self-limitation, too, is not an external constraint, but owes its existence to the insight into the inescapable precariousness of revolutionary acting-in-concert – a precariousness that affects its possibility, its success or failure, its subjects, terrains, and temporalities, all of which must be regarded as "unsecured." Although it can of course be instrumentalized, such self-limitation is in itself neither reformist nor disciplining. Rather, it is essentially linked to the task of permanent self-reflection and self-transformation in and as part of revolutionary transformation – a task the struggles and movements discussed in this chapter have experimentally taken up in their manifold practices and discourses of enacting democracy in the "here and now." In this way, the self-reflection of revolutions proves not to be a foundation, but rather – negatively – an essential feature of a practice that is constantly refracted by its own consequences, and questions and limits itself in their light. As Marx said of proletarian revolutions, it is thus no accident that revolutions "criticise themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltrinesses of their first attempts."[49]

RADICAL DEMOCRACY IN A NONHEGEMONIC KEY

Today, migrant and Indigenous struggles and movements might provide the most instructive examples of a transformative and potentially revolutionary force aimed at reconstituting the political order in a democratizing way. Via collective practices that link unburied pasts with different futures, they promise to break open the present and generate a force that keeps the unresolvable dialectic of constituent and constituted powers in play against those social and political forces that seek to

[47] See Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970).

[48] See, for example, Etienne Balibar, *Violence and Civility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), chp. 1; Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence* (London: Verso, 2020); Robin Celikates, "Learning from the Streets: Civil Disobedience in Theory and Practice," in *Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century*, ed. Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 65–72.

[49] Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Tucker, 597.

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arrest and contain it (also under the name of 'left' populism).[50] Manifesting a specific kind of constituent power – namely, the power to initiate and enact a fundamental reconstitution of borders, political community, and membership by denaturalizing, politicizing, and democratizing them – migrant and Indigenous movements exemplify the kind of democratic and potentially revolutionary reflexivity set out here, insofar as they constitute "a force or a political movement [that] can only democratize society [because] it itself is fundamentally more democratic than the system it opposes, with respect both to its objectives and to its internal operation."[51]

From the *Sans papiers* in 1990s France to the recent Migrant Caravans from Latin America to the US–Mexican border and the so-called "march of hope" in which thousands of refugees marched from Budapest to the Austrian border, politicizing the question of borders and forcing an actual political break, breach, or opening in 2015,[52] migrants have entered the political stage and claimed political agency in ways that do not follow the official scripts of liberal or even radical democracy. Their struggles highlight the fact that it is often precisely those who do not count as citizens, or even as political agents (women, workers, colonized subjects, migrants, and refugees), who develop new – or rearticulate pre-existing – forms of citizenship and of democracy that promise to be more adequate for our current political constellation of disaggregated sovereignty, traversed as it is by transnational challenges, power relations, actors, and struggles. This constellation is characterized by complex processes of debordering and rebordering that undermine the idea of territorially bounded political spaces with borders that are clearly defined and unilaterally controlled by the state.[53] At least those futures of democracy that go beyond statist imaginaries and regressive nationalist-populist tendencies (and thus manage to qualify as futures at all) will only come into view once the challenge migration and migrant political agency pose to dominant ways of thinking and practicing citizenship and democracy is taken seriously.

[50] See Etienne Balibar, *Equaliberty: Political Essays* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), conclusion; Robin Celikates, "Constituent Power Beyond Exceptionalism: Irregular Migration, Disobedience, and (Re-)Constitution," *Journal of International Political Theory* 15, no. 1 (2019): 67–81.

[51] Etienne Balibar, *Citizenship* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 128–29. For a perspective on Indigenous struggles that emphasizes their revolutionary dynamic and potential, see Estes, *Our History Is the Future*.

[52] See Madjiguène Cissé, *Parole de sans-papiers* (Paris: La Dispute, 1999); "The Border Crossing Us," *Viewpoint Magazine*, November 7, 2018, www.viewpointmag.com/2018/11/07/from-what-shore-does-socialism-arrive; Bernd Kasparek and Marc Speer, "Of Hope: Hungary and the Long Summer of Migration," trans. Elena Buck, *bordermonitoring.eu*, September 9, 2015, http://bordermonitoring.eu/ungarn/2015/09/of-hope-en.

[53] See, for example, Anne McNevin, *Contesting Citizenship: Irregular Migrants and New Frontiers of the Political* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Maurice Stierl, *Migrant Resistance in Contemporary Europe* (London: Routledge, 2019).

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This challenge also requires rethinking the radical-democratic and revolutionary idea of democratization as the actualization of constituent power that is sometimes presented as the source from which any future of democracy would have to spring. It is no longer convincing, if it ever was, to portray this power as a quasi-mythical force that is wholly external to the existing order and erupts only in extraordinary founding moments in which the people as a unified agent enters the political scene (think of the iconic dates of 1776, 1789, 1917). Rather, constituent powers would have to be conceptualized as a plural dynamic situated within revolutionary movements that unsettle established orders and their porous boundaries, transgressing their logic and reconfiguring them from within and from their margins. This would also make it possible to reverse the ahistorical and asociological uncoupling of the event of the eruption of constituent power (in founding moments or great revolutions) from ongoing struggles and movements that seek to enact it in the "here and now."

In my view, this points to the antihegemonic and antipopulist logic of revolutionary democratic practice. The deep nationalist logic of populist appeals to the "real people" in an "us vs. them" register only "serves to recapture the insurgent energies of emancipatory struggles and entrap the 'common folk' within the borders of the Nation, reinscribing a democratic political enclosure whereby human life is subordinated to and subjected by the nationalist metaphysics of state power."[54] Against such capture, democracy requires us to acknowledge and institutionalize as far as possible "the open and contestable signification of democracy," to find ways to "release democracy from containment by any particular form while insisting on its value in connoting political self-rule by the people, whoever the people are."[55] What does this requirement imply for the forms of organization and self-understanding of revolutionary struggles and movements? What are its consequences for thinking about emancipatory politics in the register of hegemony, populism, and hegemonic populism?

As I argue, revolutionary struggles for emancipation and democratization in the "here and now" cannot have the same form and follow the same logic as struggles for hegemony "from the right" that are evidently not concerned with, and indeed embrace the task of, constructing an exclusionary and homogeneous collective subject that can serve as the firm ground of affective identification and mobilization. As I have attempted to show in the preceding sections, the revolutionary potential of enacting radical democracy "here and now" is tied to acknowledging its fundamental open-endedness, plurality, and self-reflexivity against the pressures of closure and homogenization that

[54] Nicholas de Genova, "Rebordering 'The People': Notes on Theorizing Populism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 2 (2018): 368.

[55] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 20.

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necessarily come with the hegemonic logic of populism and its "us vs. them" logic.

Turning to Indigenous and migrant struggles – despite the differences between them and their internal heterogeneity – allows us to highlight alternative ways of undoing the *demos* and remaking *demoi* from forms of political struggle that question established notions of the people and its boundaries but might not end up embracing a positive vision of 'We the people' in the singular. Without being able to do justice to their complexity, let me briefly sketch in how far both Indigenous and migrant struggles question rather than instantiate the logic of hegemonic claim-making that is still so often associated with revolutionary and radically transformative political projects.

In a settler colonial context, struggles for self-determination by Indigenous and occupied people and peoples obviously clash with the state's claim to exclusive territorial sovereignty and the underlying imaginary of popular sovereignty.[56] The radically democratic potential of Indigenous struggles today can be seen precisely in the dual displacement of hegemony, which can no longer serve as the privileged logic of political articulation, and of the modern nation-state, which can no longer serve as the unquestioned terrain for democratic struggle.[57] As a result, Indigenous struggles for self-determination and against the colonial and imperial project of the modern nation-state to impose homogeneity and (territorial, cultural, political, legal) uniformity have the potential to escape both the framework of protest and that of dominant notions of civility, even if they might appear as "constituent powers" and "civic powers" in the plural.[58] At the same time, they can fundamentally transform the very meaning of "self-determination" beyond the bounded and sovereign model of the (individual or collective) self toward an acknowledgment of the interdependency and relationality of all (human and nonhuman) members of the community.

Similarly, and despite important differences, in a world in which nation-states claim a unilateral right to control their borders – both the borders of their territory and the borders of membership and belonging – migrant and refugee movements challenge a whole way of life and a political imaginary that entirely abstracts from its own structural implication in the production of the conditions that violate migrants' "right to stay" as well as their "right to escape."[59] These

[56] See, for example, Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon, eds., *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019); and Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

[57] See Janet Conway and Jakeet Singh, "Radical Democracy in Global Perspective: Notes from the Pluriverse," *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2011): 689–706.

[58] See James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, vol. 2, *Imperialism and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 195–221, 243–309.

[59] See, for example, Celikates, "Constituent Power Beyond Exceptionalism"; Sandro Mezzadra, *Diritto di fuga* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2006); for a response to the claim that Indigenous commitments to land and jurisdiction betray an antimigrant and anti-Black character, see

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struggles are, of course, also struggles for and about politicization and the boundaries of the political. They seem to be misidentified both in their content and in their form when they are interpreted as contestatory responses to the question of "who the people really are." The "We" in "We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us" and "We are here because you were/are there" is not, and does not necessarily aspire to be, the same as the "We" in "We, the People."

Not all political and social struggles of our age can thus equally well, or at all, be articulated in the language of popular sovereignty, of sovereignty and of the people in the singular. Such nationalist-populist articulations would also miss the prefigurative potential that resides in the ways in which these struggle challenge and transcend the dominant logic of the nation-state and its border regime by developing, resuscitating, and enacting alternative forms of political agency, belonging, and solidarity in the here and now. The point is not to find a new vanguard in Indigenous and migrant struggles onto which frustrated revolutionary desires can be projected, but to see the collective enactment of denied freedoms, the temporary realization of utopian possibilities in the here and now, and the practical decentering of the state for what they are: openings of political space that reveal a revolutionary potential.[60] Radical democracy in a nonhegemonic key would thus start from the margins of the demos, from the refugees, the migrants, the exiles and those who come after them, from "the discounted, the ineligible," "the stateless, the occupied, and the disenfranchised," "confounding the distinction between inside and outside" and questioning established notions of the people and its boundaries without ending up embracing a positive vision of "We the people."[61]

Both Indigenous and migrant struggles can be seen as pointing beyond claims to access existing legal statuses (such as citizen, refugee) to a different political logic that questions the foundations of how political belonging is imagined in the homogenizing terms of nation-states, borders, and citizenship. At the very least, these struggles challenge unquestioned notions of belonging and as a consequence call for a radical revision, pluralization, and deterritorialization of the demos, of peoplehood and of its internal and external borders in ways that unsettle the existing terms of the struggle for hegemony rather than making a move that conforms to its nationalist-populist logic. They can thus be seen as steps toward overcoming a politics of citizenship as membership in a bordered and homogeneous community – a truly revolutionary horizon that goes against the construction of their claims as inherently limited and marginal.[62]

Glen Sean Coulthard, "Response," *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory* 24, no. 3 (2016): 96. As one slogan has it, indigenous sovereignty means no borders; its enemy is settler colonialism, not migration.

[60] See Stierl, *Migrant Resistance*, chp. 7. [61] Butler, *Notes Toward*, 51, 80, 78.

[62] See Sandro Mezzadra, "Abolitionist Vistas of the Human. Border Struggles, Migration and Freedom of Movement," *Citizenship Studies* 24, no. 4 (2020): 424–40; and Anne McNevin,

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These struggles potentially reconfigure what bell hooks calls "imposed marginality" as "a site of deprivation" into a "space of radical openness" and a "site of radical possibility, a space of resistance" from which "counterhegemonic discourse" can emerge.[63] The question then becomes which forms of revolutionary practice, of acting-in-concert and of self-organization, can enact and express rather than repress and conceal *this* logic of the political that moves against and beyond hegemony, thus remaining "counterhegemonic" in the sense of transgressing the constrictions of hegemony, as much as it moves against and beyond the borders of a world divided along state lines.

"Time and the Figure of the Citizen," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 33 (2020): 545–59.

[63] bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36 (1989): 20, 23.

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