

JANAR MIHKELSAAR

Giorgio Agamben and Post-Foundational
Political Ontology



JYVÄSKYLÄN
YLIOPISTO



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS	8
1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS	9
2. POST-FOUNDATIONAL POLITICAL ONTOLOGY	18
2.1. Heidegger and Marxism: “The Heideggerian Left”	19
2.2. Laclau and Mouffe’s Hegemonic Conception of Politics	23
2.3. Marchart’s Political Ontology as a First Philosophy	27
3. GIORGIO AGAMBEN AND “THE HEIDEGGERIAN LEFT”	33
3.1. Agamben as the Philosopher of the Heideggerian Left	34
3.2. Other Influences on Agamben and Post-Foundational Political Ontology	39
3.3. Marchart and Laclau’s Critical Assessments of Agamben’s Work ...	48
4. SHORT OUTLINE OF THE THREE ARTICLES	51
4.1. “Political Differentiability”	51
4.2. “Giorgio Agamben’s ‘Messianic Fulfilment’ of Foundationalism in Politics”	53
4.3. “Towards a Rethinking of Laclau and Mouffe’s Conception of ‘Social Antagonisms’: Agamben’s Critique of Relation”	54
5. INTERCONNECTION OF THE MAIN THESES	57
5.1. The End of Metaphysics, or the Limits of an Order	58
5.1.1. Agamben’s Juridico-Political Order	63
5.1.2. Laclau’s Discursive-Hegemonic Order	65
5.2. Agamben’s Conception of the Potentiality-Actuality Passage	70
5.3. Post-Foundational Political Ontology Reconsidered	77
6. CONCLUDING REMARKS	82
REFERENCES	85
PUBLICATIONS	89
SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN	159
SUMMARY IN FINNISH	162
CURRICULUM VITAE	165
ELULOOKIRJELDUS	167

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I. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The present dissertation that investigates Giorgio Agamben's political thinking and Ernesto Laclau/Oliver Marchart's post-foundational political ontology consists of three interrelated articles: "Political Differentiability", "Giorgio Agamben's 'Messianic Fulfilment' of Foundationalism in Politics", and "Towards a Rethinking Laclau and Mouffe's of Conception of 'Social Antagonisms': Agamben's Critique of Relation". These studies examine three major topics of contemporary political ontology: "the political difference" between "the political" and politics, political post-foundationalism, and social antagonism. The following introduction serves as a summary that outlines the wider philosophical context, the central theses, and the interconnection between the aforementioned articles.

In general terms, the subject matter of the present dissertation is political ontology or "the philosophy of the political" that, in my view, grows out of the collapse of fundamental ontology or, to use the traditional term, of metaphysics. Traditionally, metaphysics is seen as not investigating the being of this or that particular being (e.g., a table, a house), but rather as the study of "the being of beings" (*das Sein des Seiende*), of "being *qua* being" (Heidegger 1998). Throughout the history of the Occident, being has disclosed itself as a foundation on the basis of which the beingness of all beings shines forth (Heidegger 2006: 65–66; Heidegger 2007: 69–70). Metaphysics is in this sense the most fundamental form of foundationalism (i.e., theology) that envisions beings as a whole from the perspective of an ultimate or final being like god, Hegel's absolute, and Descartes's subject. Metaphysics (also called a first philosophy) grounds all particular sciences or, better, regional ontologies, examining one specific region of beings. In face of the nihilism that Friedrich Nietzsche associated with the devaluation of Christian values, the metaphysical chain of "onto-theo-logical" fundamentals from *arche* to Edmund Husserl's transcendental subjectivity began to break down (Agamben 1991: xi–xiii; Agamben 1999: 45–47; Derrida 2007: 352–355). Nihilism, as Martin Heidegger has argued, does not simply signify plain termination, but rather "completion" (*Vollendung*) of metaphysics (Heidegger 2007: 71–74; see also Agamben 1991: xiii). What is at stake in the age of nihilism is nothing less than the final and extreme unveiling of being as the *nothing* of all beings. Pure being, which metaphysics has sought to isolate from "the many meanings of the term "Being"", appears as the nothing, as the most empty and meaningless word (Agamben 1998: 182). The nothing that refers to the groundlessness of the self-grounding of being is the "ineffable" limit of the Western metaphysics. Following Agamben and Laclau, I argue in the present dissertation that this unsayable limit is primarily the *passage* or "the zone of undecidability" between outside and inside, negativity and positivity, the political and politics, semiotics and semantics, particularity and universality. To dwell in the age of nihilism means to experience the imprisonment within this very passage, in the Nothing.

In Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* that attempts to renew again "the question of being", the fundamental categories of the Western politics do not play any significant role. But Agamben, one of the best known and original philosophers in contemporary Italy, draws attention to an ineffable negativity that has destined not only the metaphysical grounding of all beings, but also the *political* self-grounding of the juridico-political order (Agamben 1998: 7–8, 182). Since the ancient Greek *polis*, as Agamben shows in his internationally acclaimed and controversial work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, the metaphysical quest to isolate pure being from many ways of being has been inseparable from the political quest to isolate "bare life" (*nuda vita*) from many ways of life (Agamben 1998: 182). Bare life, insofar as it is subjected to the sovereign power, is *homo sacer* (a sacred man) who "*may be killed and yet not sacrificed*" (Agamben 1998: 8; original emphasis). *Homo sacer*, a killable life, is the "original political element" (i.e., negativity) in relation to which a juridico-political order has grounded itself. Simultaneously with the breakdown of the Occidental onto-theo-logy, the juridico-political tradition brings to light its ineffable limit in the figure of *homo sacer* (Agamben 1998: 11–12). Thinking and politics, having reached the extreme point of culmination and exhaustion, run up against their ineffable limits – i.e., against the nothing and *homo sacer*. For Agamben, this negative limit is the point of intersection where the metaphysical tradition and the juridico-political tradition pass over into each other (Agamben 1998: 182; see Agamben 2002: 75–80). The undecidable passage where we dwell is therefore a *political* passage. That is why a general ontology, or metaphysics, is constitutively a political ontology (e.g., Agamben 1998: 7–8; Agamben 2004: 75–80). Thus, without taking politics into account, it is not possible to grasp the constitution of the Western metaphysics.

Due to the influence of Heidegger on political ontology, I situate the main topics and themes of the current dissertation on a wider horizon called "the Heideggerian Left". Yet, accepting Heidegger's thinking as the main point of reference in no way entails that its reception would have been univocal or unquestioning. Troubles emerge already within the so-called "left-Heideggerianism" itself. Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, for instance, reject the philosophical mode of thinking inaugurated by Heidegger; and others, like Ernesto Laclau and Agamben, elaborate some but reject other ideas and concepts. Disavowal and avowal go hand in hand. Yet, the philosophy of the political, whether negatively or positively, sees Heidegger nevertheless as a partner in the discussion. As long as the dissertation specifically studies the intersection of Agamben's philosophy and post-foundational political ontology, I have refrained from exploring certain clusters of fundamental questions. In order to focus on the explication and defence of my theses, I have placed within brackets all questions of *fidelity* to Heidegger's work, for example, problems such as: Is Agamben's interpretation of *Ereignis* correct? Is Laclau's understanding of the ontological difference feasible? Does Marchart present Heidegger's understanding of "difference as difference" adequately? In the same way, I do not examine whether left-Heideggerian political thought *succeeds* or *fails* in its

critique of Heidegger. That is to say, I do not explore problems such as: Has Agamben a “wider” conception of nihilism that encompasses within itself even Heidegger’s thought? Does Agamben succeed in bringing to language the limits of Heidegger’s thinking? Does Marchart succeed in demonstrating the pre-eminence of the political difference over the ontological difference?

Agamben is a philosopher whose works encompass archaeological investigations on diverse topics such as commandment, messianism, ethics, Auschwitz, the state of exception, language, sovereignty, civil war, “form-of-life”, and duty. Since the publication of the English translations of *Coming Community* and *Homo Sacer*, more and more secondary literature has been published on the diverse dimensions of Agamben’s philosophy.¹ Some of the first collections of essays like *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben’s Homo Sacer* and *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life* concentrate on *Homo Sacer*, too often disregarding Agamben’s earlier writings on language, aesthetics, and potentiality. Although Eva Geulen’s *Giorgio Agamben zur Einführung* seeks to take a wider perspective by studying the different influences of Agamben’s work, it still tends to remain confined to the framework of *Homo Sacer*. In contrast to this, Leland de la Durantaye’s *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* offers a rational reconstruction of Agamben’s intellectual biography by reading and commenting on many of Agamben’s works and by dealing with a wide range of objections to the *homo sacer* project. In a similar way, Catherine Mills’s work *Philosophy of Agamben* gives a systematic overview of Agamben’s views on the main topics such as metaphysics, aesthetics, politics, ethics, and messianism. At the end of her book, Mills suggests that Agamben’s philosophical radicalism may slip into “a kind of anti-political quietism” (Mills 2008: 137).

Over the years, Agamben’s philosophical ideas have gained currency across disciplines. Yet, for many commentators, Agamben’s historical reconstructions paint far too extreme and pessimistic a picture of the human condition. With provocative and abstract paradigms such as the concentration camp, the state of exception, *homo sacer*, and the *Muselmann*, it is hard, if not impossible, to throw light on socio-political issues that are both diverse and complex. Take,

¹ So far, three works of Agamben have been translated into Estonian. Agamben, G. 2009. *Homo Sacer: Suveräänne võim ja paljas elu*. Trans. by M. Kangro. Tallinn: Eesti Keele Sihtasutus; Agamben, G. 2015. *Tulevane Kogukond. Vahendid ilma Eesmärgita*. Trans. by M. Kangro. Tallinn: Eesti Keele Sihtasutus. In addition, several doctoral dissertations have touched on Agamben’s ideas. See, for example, Monticelli, D. 2008. *Wholeness and its Reminders: Theoretical Procedures of Totalization and Detotalization in Semiotics, Philosophy and Politics*. Tartu: University of Tartu Press; Tomberg, J. 2011. *Kirjanduse lepitav otstarve*. Tartu: University of Tartu Press. In Finnish, for instance, see Agamben, G. 2001. *Keinot vailla päämäärää: reunamerkitöjä politiikasta*. Trans. by J. Vähämäki. Helsinki: Tutkijaliitto. On the interpretation of Agamben’s work, for instance, see Ojakangas, M. 2005. Impossible Dialogue on Bio-Power: Agamben and Foucault. In *Foucault Studies*, nr. 2, 5–28; Ojakangas, M. 2010. Conscience, the remnant and the witness: Genealogical remarks on Giorgio Agamben’s ethics. In *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 36, nr. 6, 697–717.

for example, Jean-Philippe Deranty, according to whom Agamben “isolates ontological essences in which the common ground of apparently different, or even opposite, empirical and historical phenomena is revealed” (Deranty 2004). Or Paolo Virno’s reading, which goes along the same lines: “Agamben is a thinker of great value but also, in my opinion, a thinker with *no* political vocation. Then, when Agamben speaks of the biopolitical he has the tendency to transform it into an *ontological* category with value already since the archaic Roman right” (Virno 2002; my emphasis). Here, as many other critics are inclined to emphasise, the ontologisation of politics is dangerous, if for no other reason than that seeking to grasp the substantial essence of the (political) world disregards historical and sociological specificity. And according to William Rasch, the *homo sacer* project echoes Agamben’s messianic distrust and aversion towards the contingent and “dirty” world of politics (Rasch 2009: 11; see also Rasch 2004: 89–102; Rasch 2007). From Marchart and Laclau’s perspective, Agamben’s pessimistic picture of the human condition is untenable as long as modern politics does not necessarily have to culminate in “the unavoidable advance towards a totalitarian society” and in devastating violence on the part of the sovereign power (Laclau 2014: 213; see Marchart 2010: 221–241). Lastly, Eva Geulen thinks that if the ontological (re-)grounding of politics is justified “in reference to the camp inmates”, in reference to the limit figure of the *Muselmann*, then Agamben’s revival of political ontology discredits itself, and it should be resisted as an unnecessary supplement (Geulen 2009: 25, 28).

In opposition to the above-mentioned sceptical responses, there are more sympathetic attempts to elucidate the troubled and misunderstood relationship between Agamben’s philosophy and politics. In recent years, the topic of politics in Agamben’s work has been explored in several monographs. To begin with, David Kishik’s work *The Power of Life: Agamben and the Coming Politics* interprets Agamben’s reflections on life and politics in light of the struggle between “the power *over* life” and “the power *of* life”: “Whereas in the first process, life cedes its power to external forces, in the second, these external forces become powerless in face of life” (Kishik 2012: 100–101). In 2013, Jessica Whyte published *Catastrophe and Redemption: The Political Thought of Giorgio Agamben* in which she argues that, in Agamben’s political thought, the saving power or redemption is already present in the signs of catastrophe. In her book, Whyte puts forward and defends a thesis that this identification of redemption and catastrophe suffers from serious flaws (Whyte 2013: 6). Sergei Prozorov’s *Agamben and Politics: A Critical Introduction* argues against the pessimistic interpretations of the *homo sacer* project that are intimidated and baffled by Agamben’s hyperbolic and apocalyptic statements such as “the concentration camp as biopolitical paradigm of the modern” and “an inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism” (Prozorov 2014: 172–182). By investigating topics ranging from language to history, Prozorov convincingly demonstrates the optimistic and affirmative tonality of Agamben’s overall approach to politics that tends to get lost and missed in Agamben’s destructive critique of the Law and other power apparatuses. Elaborating the concept of

“inoperativity”, Prozorov offers a well-grounded interpretation of Agamben’s “inoperative politics” that is illustrated and substantiated by different examples. What, in my opinion, unites Prozorov’s book and the three articles of the dissertation is a specific emphasis on the central role of inoperativity in Agamben’s philosophy and politics.

Finally, I want to mention Mathew Abbott’s book *The Figure of This World: Agamben and the Question of Political Ontology* that differentiates Agamben’s political thinking from political philosophy concerned with socio-political issues on the ground of human reason and from “political theology” (e.g., Carl Schmitt) concerned with the “sociological” study of the correspondence between the theological and juridico-political concepts (Abbott 2012: 23–25; see Schmitt 1996: 41–55). In between these options, there is a third field of research – i.e., political ontology – that, according to Abbott, is better suited for the classification of Agamben’s philosophical and political vocation. Political ontology, simply put, studies the *ontological* underpinnings of “the ontic possibilities for human collectives”; what is at issue in the question of “the political” is the experience of being as a “political exigency” (Abbott 2012: 23–24; see also Abbott 2014: 13–32). On Abbott’s account, there have emerged two opposite approaches to the determination of political ontology. On the one hand, there is Marchart who interprets the political ontology as dealing with a groundless foundation or with a *political foundation* on the basis of which the social objectivity is constructed. In contrast, Abbott supports Agamben’s version of political ontology that calls “all attempts at ‘grounding’ politics into question” (Abbott 2012: 24). The opposition of these two approaches to political ontology stand at the centre of my three articles.

While Kishik, White, Prozorov, and Abbott put forward compelling interpretations, defences, and developments of Agamben’s account of politics, the current dissertation juxtaposes Laclau/Marchart’s post-foundational political ontology and Agamben’s account of the juridico-political tradition. To demonstrate the fruitfulness and contribution of Agamben’s approach, I show how the main issues of post-foundational political ontology – i.e., political difference, post-foundationalism, and social antagonism – can be criticised and reconsidered using Agamben’s basic insights. In this sense, my three articles are concerned with the points of confrontation between these two alternative conceptions of political ontology, rather than with the immanent exegesis and defence of Agamben’s texts.

As I mentioned, left-Heideggerian political thought encompasses a wide range of different philosophers such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Alain Badiou, Claude Lefort, and Jacques Rancière. A critical line of thought, with which I am occupied in my articles, starts with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s rearticulation of Marxism in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and extends to Marchart’s *Post-Foundational Political Thought*. But why to focus on Laclau and, in particular, Marchart’s elaboration of political post-foundationalism? Starting with *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau has persistently criticised and reworked the main categories of the Marxist tradition, such as

“hegemony” and “emancipation”. Laclau’s views on discourse, identity, democracy, antagonism, and populism have provoked an on-going academic debate.² What is a common thread of Laclau’s “circumstantial interventions, taking place around a concrete event”, is the attempt to demonstrate and substantiate the *contingent* structure of social objectivity that is constituted around the “political articulation” of its antagonistic limits (Laclau 1996: viii). Instead of proposing a regional ontology of politics, Laclau has implicitly moved towards a general ontology of all beings (e.g., Laclau 2014: 203–206; Marchart 2005; Marchart 2007: 146–149; Marchart 2010: 211–218). Drawing upon a number of key insights from the hegemonic approach, Marchart elaborates a political ontology at the level of a general ontology. What, in my opinion, distinguishes Marchart’s approach from other contemporary philosophies of the political is precisely the conscious objective to establish the impossible but necessary discipline of a first philosophy (Marchart 2007: 162–169). Many contemporary thinkers have shied away from making this radical step. Badiou’s militant politics, for example, privileges mathematics, specifically set theory. In *Post-Foundational Political Thought*, Marchart studies critically the different candidates on the basis of which to construct political ontology. By selecting Laclau’s theory of hegemony, Marchart eliminates for different reasons others like Nancy, Badiou, Lefort, Rancière, and, last but not least, Agamben. A general claim I make in all of the three articles is that Marchart’s omission of Agamben is *problematic*.

Laclau examines Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* in the short essay “Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?”; and Marchart’s work *Die Politische Differenze* contains a chapter “Politische Differenz ohne Politik: Giorgio Agamben” [Political Difference without Politics: Giorgio Agamben]. Marchart and Laclau challenge *Homo Sacer* on different but related grounds of which I have identified the three that appear the most major to me (Laclau 2014; Marchart 2010). 1) Drawing upon Heidegger’s “ontological difference” between being and beings, Marchart’s *Post-Foundational Political Thought* constructs the political difference between the political (the ontological) and politics (the ontic). From Marchart’s point of view, Agamben delimits the political difference to abstract reflections on the political. In this sense, Agamben collapses the political difference into the ontological side (Marchart 2010: 238–239). 2)

² Since its publication, Laclau and Mouffe’s work has stood at the centre of academic debates. See, for instance, Smith, A. 1998. *Laclau and Mouffe: The Radical Democratic Imaginary*. London: Routledge; Torfing, J. 1999. *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe, and Zizek*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell; and Critchley, S. & Marchart, O. (Eds.) 2004. *Laclau: A Critical Reader*. London: Routledge. On the reception of Laclau and Mouffe’s ideas in Estonia, see Ventsel, A. 2009. *Towards Semiotic Theory of Hegemony*. Tartu: University of Tartu Press; Selg, P. 2011. *An Outline for a Theory of Political Semiotics*. Tallinn: Tallinn University Press; and Lipping, J. 2009. Ernesto Laclau. In Annus, E. (Ed.) *20. sajandi mõttevoolud*. Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 623–643. In Finnish, see Palonen, E. 2008. Laclau ja Mouffe: Diskurssiteoriaa ja radikaalia demokratiaa. In Lindroos, K. & Soininen, S. (Eds.) *Politiikan nykyteoreetikoja*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 209–232.

Facing the breakdown of metaphysics, politics has to take upon itself the task of grounding the social field as a totality. From Marchart and Laclau's perspective, however, this political grounding, insofar as it produces contingent foundations, is never able to bring about a "communitarian fullness", i.e., society as a self-identical and self-grounding being.³ That is why a concrete totality of "the social" is in principle always a partial and failed totality, a political totality and why the political grounding of the social bond is an endless task (e.g., Laclau 1996: 71–72; Marchart 2007: 167). In opposition to Marchart's political post-foundational approach, I believe, Agamben wants to deactivate the nullified foundationalism that is "part and parcel of an infinite task" without fulfilment (Agamben 2005b: 104). On Marchart's account, I think, this strategy falls prey to an anti-foundationalism that is just a peculiar version of essentialist foundationalism (Marchart 2010: 227–228, 232; see also Laclau 2014: 220). 3) In his article, Laclau argues that Agamben's "sovereign ban" between the sovereign power and bare life is unsuitable for thinking "the antagonistic relation" (Laclau 2014: 211–212). Agamben's critique of sovereignty tends to eliminate social antagonism. For Laclau, the idea of an undivided and harmonious society leads Agamben's political thinking astray.

So far we have seen that the post-foundational conception of politics confronts Agamben's philosophy with serious challenges. In light of this, a decision must be made: one either responds to Marchart and Laclau's assessment or abandons the *homo sacer* project altogether. By engaging with the political difference, post-foundationalism, and social antagonism from Agamben's perspective, the current dissertation has chosen the first option. In my articles, I seek to find an answer to the following problems: *Does Agamben delimit the political difference between the political and politics on the ontological side? Is it possible to reflect on the political difference as political difference from Agamben's perspective? Is Agamben's thinking a part of the foundationalist paradigm? How is Marchart's post-foundationalism related to Agamben's messianism? Does Agamben seek to establish a Messianic Kingdom, a harmonious society beyond socio-political divisions? Are social antagonisms conceivable only through the category of the limit relation?*

The present dissertation collects reflections on the topics of political ontology that are examined in three articles. The first article, "Political Differentiability", defends the thesis that, contrary to Marchart's belief, the political difference as political difference does not appear in a never-ending play between the political and politics. To resolve this Heideggerian problem, the political differencing should rather be rendered inoperative. In order to seize hold of the political difference as such, I think it is not enough to emphasise the *constitutability* of the political and politics. The second article, entitled "Giorgio Agamben's 'Messianic Fulfilment' of Foundationalism in Politics", argues that Marchart's post-foundationalism has got stuck in the empty form of

³ On the post-foundational theories of society, see Marchart, O. 2014. *Das unmögliche Objekt. Eine post-fundamentalistische Theorie der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp.

foundationalism or, in other words, in an “imperfect nihilism” (Agamben 1998: 53). Through “the messianic fulfilment” of grounding acts, however, Agamben is able to render inoperative the metaphysical paradigm of foundationalism. In general, I believe, Agamben’s ideas fit neither within foundationalism nor post-foundationalism. In “Towards a Rethinking of Laclau and Mouffe’s Conception of ‘Social Antagonisms’: Agamben’s Critique of Relation”, I point to the similarities between Agamben’s sovereign decision and Laclau and Mouffe’s political articulation. This comparison reveals the structural analogy due to which the hegemonic relation does not escape Agamben’s critique of the sovereign relation, that is, the “non-relational relation” or “the limit form of relation” (see Agamben 1998: 29; Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 139; Laclau 2014: 165). Although Agamben calls into question the limit relation, I argue that he nevertheless does not do away with social antagonism.

In what way are the three articles connected? Is there one central idea or concept that forms all the above-mentioned theses of the present dissertation into one coherent whole? How is the political difference linked with post-foundationalism and social antagonisms? In all three articles, although they are written on different topics, I reflect on one and the same configuration – that is to say, on *the passage or “the zone of undecidability”* between life and law, *zoe* and *bios*, *phone* and *logos*, *langue* and *parole*, exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, means and ends, exception and rule, negativity and positivity, the political and the social, a constituting power and a constituted power, a signifier and a signified, semiotics and semantics, particularity and universality, potentiality and actuality, being and beings. I argue that the problem of the passage is the *common subject matter* of Laclau/Marchart’s political post-foundationalism and Agamben’s *homo sacer* project. In my opinion, the fundamental passage which Agamben uses to deactivate the (political) articulation between these dichotomies is *the passage from potentiality to actuality*. For this reason, Agamben attributes a fundamental importance to the being of potentiality that is the most difficult but also the most central topic to which he returns again and again in different books and essays (e.g. Agamben 1998: 44–48; Agamben 1999: 177–219; Agamben 2013a: 92–99). Without tackling the structure of potentiality, I think it is hard, if not impossible, to grasp how the political difference, post-foundationalism, and social antagonism are connected. The problem of how to conceive the potentiality-actuality passage runs through the current dissertation as a thin red line. Thus, in my opinion, the major contemporary issues of political ontology cannot be resolved properly without resorting to Agamben’s reconceptualisation of the “modal” categories. The *homo sacer* project, if nothing else, proves the relevance of potentiality to the different issues of contemporary political ontology.

The present introduction of the dissertation is divided into four subchapters. The second subchapter gives a short overview of the Heideggerian Left (in particular, Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxist theory of hegemony and Marchart’s post-foundational thought on politics). The third subchapter describes Agamben as a protagonist of the Heideggerian Left, and here I also summarise the main

influences on Agamben's philosophy and post-foundational political ontology. Furthermore, I sum up Marchart and Laclau's main critical points regarding Agamben's work. The fourth subchapter outlines the main theses of all three articles. In the final subchapter, I explicate how my three articles are linked.

2. POST-FOUNDATIONAL POLITICAL ONTOLOGY

To explain the fatal shortcomings of Marxism in the 20th century, Laclau and Mouffe pinpoint the essentialist, foundationalist, and reductionist underpinnings of the Marxist categories that subsume the totality of history and society under the necessary laws of economics (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 7–88; Laclau 1990a: 41–60; Laclau 1991: 56). The historical development of society, for instance, goes always through the same stages that reflect the objective contradiction between the labour and the capital. Without doing away with the figures of foundation (e.g., totality, universality), Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* criticises foundationalism and essentialism due to which Marxism has failed to cope with the political necessities in hard times. In contemporary academic research, Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis is used to investigate different types of socio-political phenomena such as populism, identity, and democracy.⁴

All my articles are inspired by Oliver Marchart's elaboration of Laclau and Mouffe's discursive theory of hegemony in *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*. Marchart has rewritten and revised his thesis in the later writings such as *Die Politische Differenz: Zum Denken des Politischen bei Nancy, Lefort, Badiou, Laclau und Agamben* and *Das unmögliche Objekt: Eine postfundamentalistische Theorie der Gesellschaft*. The present dissertation departs mainly from Marchart's first book whose relevance may be summarised succinctly in *three* points. Firstly, the work engages with the contemporary philosophies of the political, demonstrating how the political difference between the political and politics defines implicitly or explicitly our current predicament. Secondly, political ontology is not just a regional ontology – an ontology of politics –, but rather a general ontology of all beings. And last but not least, Marchart stresses the ontic relevance of a concrete politics for all philosophical theories of the political.

The current subchapter is divided into three sections. The first section explores the central tenets of “the Heideggerian Left”. The second section summarises Laclau and Mouffe's “post-Marxist” approach. In the final section, I describe how Marchart radicalises the main views of Laclau and Mouffe.

⁴ On the post-structuralist theory of discourse, for instance, see Howarth, D. & Norval, J. A. & Stavrakakis, J. (Eds.) 2000. *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies, and Social Change*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

2.1. Heidegger and Marxism: “The Heideggerian Left”

While posing and laying out “the question of the meaning of being” (*die Frage nach dem Sinn von Sein*), Heidegger’s *Being and Time* remains silent on ethics. Nor can one find there a systematic and comprehensive exposition of political philosophy. In spite of some scattered remarks, it seems as if ethics – as well as politics – is fundamentally incompatible with the thinking of being. This philosophical “gap” has perhaps laid a fruitful ground for the plurality of interpretations from various political perspectives. Due to Heidegger’s rectorship and the membership of the Nazi party (NSDAP), this issue has become even more acute. To some extent, these facts explain the ambivalent reception that expresses itself in thinking with and against Heidegger. The current dissertation concentrates mainly on “the Heideggerian Left” (*la gauche heideggérienne*) that, as a concept, was first coined by Dominique Janicaud in his investigation of the reception of Heidegger in France (Marchart 2007: 10).

The lines dedicated to Marx come nowhere close to matching the pages that Heidegger has written on Nietzsche and Hölderlin.⁵ Still, it is undeniable that “fundamental ontology” and “the history of being” have left a noticeable trace in Marxism. Consider, for instance, the work of Herbert Marcuse and of Karel Kosík.⁶ Here, my aim is not to rationally reconstruct any of Heidegger’s basic ideas or concepts; nor do I investigate Heidegger’s intellectual biography (e.g., the *Kehre*). In the same way as it is possible to study the historical transformations of Marxism, I think it is possible to examine how Heidegger’s thinking has been appropriated and expropriated by his successors. The current dissertation studies in particular the Leftist interpretations labelled as the “Heideggerian Left”, “Heideggerian Marxism”, “Heidegger of the Left”, or “Left-Heideggerianism”.

To begin with, left-Heideggerian political thought names neither a philosophical doctrine nor some unified school of thought. Nor does the Heideg-

⁵ Even though Heidegger did not deal extensively with the thought of Marx, “The Letter on ‘Humanism’” offers some enlightening observations. After having situated Marx in the humanist line of thought, Heidegger makes an interesting remark in the middle of the article: “Because Marx by experiencing estrangement attains an essential dimension of history, the Marxist view of history is superior to that of other historical accounts” (Heidegger 1998: 259). Marx, in other words, experiences the estrangement or, better, the “alienation” (*Entfremdung*) that structures history. With the socio-economic analysis and critique of alienation in capitalist societies, Marx builds the eschatological picture of history that ends in the termination of the class contradiction. Yet, the Marxist concept of alienation, insofar as it stays blind to the “unconcealment” of being, belongs in the metaphysical tradition of the Occident rooted in the “homelessness” (*Heimatlosigkeit*) of the human being (Heidegger 1998: 259).

⁶ Kosík, K. 1976. *Dialectics of the Concrete: A Study on Problems of Man and World*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company; and Marcuse, H. 2005. *Heideggerian Marxism*. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.

gerian Left signify some kind of a political party. Instead, we are confronted with different, not to say conflicting, leftist interventions in Heidegger's terminology. What unifies this heterogeneous group of thinkers is not so much a well-defined essence, but rather a "family resemblance" that, in Wittgenstein's terms, reigns between some overlapping issues, themes, and problems of which none is predominant. In the history of metaphysics, Heidegger's "destruction" of metaphysics signifies the event that has affected different strands of thought, such as existentialism, philosophical archaeology, post-structuralism, and psychoanalysis. The following remark of Foucault is illuminating:

"Heidegger has always been for me the essential philosopher. [...] But I've never written anything on Heidegger and only a very short article on Nietzsche. [...] Perhaps someday I'll write about them, but at that point they will no longer be instruments of thought for me" (Foucault 1998: 250).

Broadly speaking, there is some truth in the claim that Foucault's genealogical analysis of institutions (e.g., prisons, clinics) and practices (e.g., truth-telling) rework and revise Heidegger's historical epochs of being.⁷ In this type of reception, Foucault is certainly not an exception. The ambivalent legacy of Heidegger constitutes the horizon within which contemporary thinking moves. And this is the case even when the Heideggerian way of thinking is vehemently, disputed, rejected, or declared irrelevant.

In order to understand what is at stake in the Heideggerian Left, I turn to an observation of a contemporary Italian philosopher, Gianni Vattimo, who explicitly identifies himself with the Leftist approach to the culmination and exhaustion of metaphysics in nihilism. Vattimo distinguishes the Heidegger of the Left from that of the Right in the following way:

"Right, in the case of Heidegger, denotes an interpretation of his overcoming of metaphysics as an effort, in spite of everything, somehow to prepare a 'return of Being', perhaps in the form of an apophatic, negative, mystical ontology; left denotes the reading [...] of the history of Being as the story of a 'long goodbye', of an interminable weakening of Being [...]" (Vattimo 1997: 13).

While Heidegger seeks to reawaken the question of being and to go back to the unthought "origin" (*Ursprung*) of metaphysical thinking, Vattimo wants to weaken the metaphysical "sending" of being as an ultimate and solid foundation for the beingness of all beings (see Vattimo 2013). One should abandon relying on an Archimedean point that anchors the plurality of discourses and the highly fragmented world. On Vattimo's account, philosophy should thus resist the temptation to make absolutist claims that defy context, history, geography, and contingency. The Heideggerian Left rejects "the foundationalist paradigm (rep-

⁷ On the relationship between Heidegger and Foucault, see Dreyfus, H. L. 2008. Being and Power: Heidegger and Foucault. In *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1–16.

resented scientifically by such diverse schools of thought as economic determinism, behaviourism, positivism, sociology, and so on)” (Marchart 2007: 5).

Yet, as Marchart has pointed out, the critique of foundationalism does not mean that the metaphysical concept of foundation is completely terminated (Marchart 2007: 14). What the end of metaphysics brings to light is the impossibility of an ultimate foundation that is universally and necessarily true regardless of time and place. The claims of foundation, insofar as they are immersed in a concrete context and in a particular discourse, fall always short of being self-evident and unquestionable. The consequence is that the undeniable premises are more and more exposed as depending on historical, geographical, and contextual circumstances. Judith Butler, for instance, talks about the need to expose the contingency of unquestionable premises that are in fact constituted through some hegemonic process of exclusion (Butler 1992: 7). From Marchart’s perspective, the Heideggerian Left experiences contingency as “the moment of the political” that interrupts the enclosed system of metaphysical categories or the being of all beings as pure presence (Marchart 2007: 5).⁸ The event of the political deconstructs the self-understanding of philosophy as an impartial, neutral exercise of reason in search of nothing more than the Truth. The philosophical terrain is politicised.

Marchart reserves the label of the Heideggerian Left mainly for those thinkers that, in the *École normale supérieure*, were associated with the *Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political* (*Centre de recherches philosophiques sur le politique*) founded by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy 1997). The idea to establish the centre came in a conference dedicated to the article “The Ends of Man” in which Jacques Derrida states right at the beginning that “[e]very philosophical colloquium necessarily has a political significance” (Derrida 1982: 109). During the time of its operation from 1980 till 1984, the Centre offered a platform and settings for debates and the exchange of ideas. For instance, among the participants were, for instance, Étienne Balibar, Luc Ferry, Jean-François Lyotard, Alain Badiou, Claude Lefort, Jacques Rancière, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Jean-Luc Nancy. Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy formulate the objective of investigation in the form of question: “How to question (indeed, can one), today, what must provisionally be called *the essence of the political*?” (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy 1997: 101; original emphasis). For most of the participants, the “essence” of the political is like Heidegger’s being that “withdraws” itself after letting beings come into being.⁹

⁸ On the relevance of contingency to political theory, see Pocock, J. G. A. 1975. *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Rosanvallon, P. 1985. *Le Moment Guizot*. Paris: Gallimard; Palonen, K. 1998. *Das 'Webersche Moment': Zur Kontingenz des Politischen*. Wiesbaden: Springer; and Abensour, M. 2011. *Democracy against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*. Cambridge: Polity.

⁹ On the political, for instance, see Lacoue-Labarthe, P. & Nancy, J.-L. 1997. *Retreating the Political*. Ed. by S. Sparks. London: Routledge; Badiou, A. 2010. *Ist Politik denkbar?*.

Taking its cue from Heidegger's work, the Centre wanted to achieve two things:

“[F]irst, to go beyond scientism and its remnants in what was the most advanced theoretical paradigm of their time, structuralism; and second, based on an awareness of the dubious if not despicable political inclinations of Heidegger himself, to re-work and direct his thought into a more progressive direction” (Marchart 2007: 2).

Thus, in Marchart's opinion, the Heideggerian Left is opposed to scientism for which all beings are adequately graspable only with the help of the methods of science. Let us think, for instance, of Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism that, through linguistic analysis and formalisation, makes the structurality of the structure into an intelligible object (see Marchart 2013: 93–120; Laclau 1996: 36–40). Modern science *objectifies* the object of its research. History, for instance, is turned into the object that is perfectly graspable with historical methods. In opposition to scientism, “the political”, “the social”, “the historical”, and “the literal” denote to the structural impossibility of full objectivity, of a sutured totality. According to Laclau and Mouffe, the symbolic structure is the over-determined space whose essence cannot be literally fixed (see Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 97–105). All the aforementioned terms are substantiated adjectives that occur quite often in the writings of Heidegger. In my opinion, all these terms, lacking an objective referent, do not denote a particular being, or a region of beings. Take, for example, “the political” (*das Politische*) that is something more than the sum of existing state institutions, bureaucratic apparatuses, or political parties.¹⁰ The political is that which political science ontologically presupposes. Linguistics, for instance, presupposes the existence of language that scientific study cannot explain (Agamben 1999: 62–76). The substantiated adjectives refer to the structural incompleteness that haunts scientific attempts at objectivisation. This ontological incompleteness is named, among other things, negativity, undecidability, and contingency.

Trans. by F. Ruda & J. Völker. Berlin: Merve Verlag; Lefort, C. 1988. *Democracy and Political Theory*. Trans. by D. Macey. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Lefort, C. & Gauchet, M. 1990. Über die Demokratie: Das Politische und die Instituierung des Gesellschaftlichen. In Rödel, U. (Ed.) *Autonome Gesellschaft und die libertäre Demokratie*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp; Gauchet, M. 1990. Die totalitäre Erfahrung und das Denken des Politischen. In Rödel, U. (Ed.) *Autonome Gesellschaft und die libertäre Demokratie*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp; Valentine, J. 2006. The Political. In *Theory Culture Society*, vol. 23, no. 2–3, 505–511; Hebekus, U. & Völker, J. 2012. *Neue Philosophien des Politischen: Zur Einführung*. Hamburg: Junius Verlag; Bedorf, T. & Röttgers, K. (Eds.) 2010. *Das Politische und die Politik*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.

¹⁰ Consider, for instance, Carl Schmitt's infamous assertion: “The state presupposes the concept of the political” (Schmitt 2009: 19). The state and the political are thus not one and the same thing. The modern state is a historical manifestation of the political. On Schmitt's account of the political, see also the first section of the third subchapter.

For Marchart and Laclau, the best example of objectivist discourse is orthodox Marxism. The 20th century, however, proved Marx to be wrong in many predictions (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 159–171; see Devenney 2004: 8–29). The working class, for example, did not degenerate into a homogenous mass; the workers, like the rest of society, proved to be more heterogeneous than was initially anticipated. New social movements (encompassing diverse struggles such as feminism, ecology, and anti-racism) called into question the leading role of the proletariat in the struggle for universal emancipation (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 159). To this course of events, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* responds by neither abandoning nor blindly defending, but rather by critically rethinking the orthodox categories of the Marxist tradition. Laclau and Mouffe formulate their post-Marxist position thus: “[I]f our intellectual project in this book is *post-Marxist*, it is evidently also *post-Marxist*” (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 4; original emphasis). Through the emphasis, the concept post-Marxism stresses two aspects: *post-Marxism*, if the prefix “post” is stressed, criticises and rejects the Marxist orthodoxy that is trapped in economic determinism, class reductionism, teleologism; *post-Marxism*, on the other hand, remains embedded in the Marxist tradition insofar as it develops “certain intuitions and discursive forms constituted within Marxism” (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 4). Post-Marxism, in other words, critically examines the foundationalist and essentialist claims, without eliminating completely the figures of foundation (e.g., totality). Post-Marxism exemplifies post-foundational political thought. In the Heideggerian Left, Marchart attributes to Laclau and Mouffe’s “theory” of hegemony a *paradigmatic* place.

In the remaining two sections, I outline Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony and then show how it is elaborated by Marchart into political ontology as a first philosophy.

2.2. Laclau and Mouffe’s Hegemonic Conception of Politics

The concept of hegemony emerged as a response to the crisis of Marxist ideology. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, different strands of Marxism from Rosa Luxemburg to George Sorel sought to account for the growing gap between the opacity of social reality and the theoretical uniformity of Marxist categories, between the actual heterogeneity of the workers and the theoretical homogeneity of the proletariat (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 18). Diverse political forces, as Leninism in Russia proved, can hegemonise the revolutionary task of the proletariat. A theoretical breakthrough, however, was made by Antonio Gramsci according to whom the working class, as a leading intellectual and cultural force, needs to create a collective will from a series of different social demands (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 65–71). Later, the discursive conception of “hegemony” seeks to leave behind the remaining

remnants of essentialism and foundationalism. To achieve this objective, as we will see, Laclau uses Heidegger's ontological difference.

Orthodox Marxists claim to have identified the objective laws of economics operative underneath the surface of social processes, institutions and practices. The economic base determines the superstructure of social phenomena such as culture and politics (Laclau 1990a: 7–42). A legal system, for instance, reflects the historical stage in which economic production finds itself at that particular moment. No matter what type of society we are dealing with, social relations and identities are determined by the laws of economics. The structure of society and history is made transparent by the impersonal and immutable laws of dialectical materialism.

If, as Laclau and Mouffe believe, the differential chain of social signifiers lacks an unquestionable centre, then society, as a signifying system, does not appear as a self-grounding objectivity, as a fully transparent and immediate reality:

“Against the essentialist vision we tend nowadays to accept the infinitude of the social, that is, the fact that any structural system is limited, that it is always surrounded by an ‘excess of meaning’ which it is unable to master and that, consequently, ‘society’ as a unitary and intelligible object which grounds its own partial processes is an impossibility” (Laclau 1990a: 90).

Contrary to metaphysical representations, society does not precede the infinite field of interlinked identities and practices as a pre-given essence or substance. What we are left with and what we have to start with in the age of dissolution of all certainties is the endless proliferation of social difference. Yet, according to Laclau and Mouffe, this does not mean that we end up with a bundle of pure particularistic identities. In the same way as society, particularities are not enclosed objectivities with a literal meaning (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 103–104). How is then social formation possible when the meaning of neither particular nor society is finally fixed?

“Communitarian fullness”, conceived as a determined and immediate being, is structurally impossible (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 93–96). Yet, for Laclau and Mouffe, this impossible object is structurally necessary insofar as social relations and particularities do not exist in a perpetual state of chaos. The social necessity for an order manifests itself intensely in the state of disorder where “‘order’ is present as that which is absent” (Laclau 1996: 44). An order, if it is present in the state of privation, lacks a particular content. Having suspended its normal functioning, an order reveals itself as an empty form or as “the empty signifier” without a particular signified. Laclau and Mouffe think that the experience of this lack sets in motion the political attempts at instituting a normal state of affairs. In the concrete circumstances, there are multiple possibilities as to how the social field can be organised. An exact form that an order takes cannot be deduced from some positive rules or premises (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 105–114). The construction of “people” occurs on a contingent

terrain where competing political forces seek to articulate a social bond. The political act of institution (or “political articulation”) gives a particular content to an order as such and, by doing so, constitutes the objectivity of the social. In this sense, Laclau and Mouffe attribute to politics “the status of an *ontology of the social*” (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: xiv; original emphasis).

In order to grasp the character of an instituted order, Laclau and Mouffe elaborate Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. A realised order, resulting from an articulatory practice, is hegemonic in the sense that “a certain particularity assumes the representation of a universality entirely incommensurable with it [...]” (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: xiii). A missing order can be embodied by different particularities none of which are by nature suitable for the task (Laclau 1996: 42–43). For Marchart and Mouffe, universality is thus a hegemonic universality; analogously, a concrete order is always a hegemonic order. In the state of crisis, political projects compete for the hegemonisation of an absent communitarian fullness. In order to hegemonise the empty signifier and fill in the lack, a particularity needs to detach itself from a particular signified. A socialist party, for instance, does not just advance its own narrow interests. In order to articulate other identities and political forces, socialism needs to address a much wider spectrum of unsatisfied socio-political concerns and issues (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 183–183). The problems of ecology, racism, or chauvinism need to be articulated within the paradigm of Marxism. What, in the end, is at stake in the workers’ struggle is not only the emancipation of the proletariat, but rather universal emancipation.

What Laclau does not get tired of emphasising is the fact that a hegemonic incarnation of communitarian fullness never sutures the gap between the universal and the particular: “[O]n the one hand, the ruler imposes a particular order; on the other, and as the alternative to this particular order is chaos (nothingness), it has also to incarnate *order as such*, whose indifference to the particularity of its contents likens it to *pure Being*” (Laclau & Zac 1994: 30; my emphasis). Here, Heidegger’s ontological difference between being and beings is reformulated as the difference between an order as such and a particular order. As such, an order does not have a fixed content. That is why the ontological and the ontic never coincide for Laclau: “[T]here is no ontic content that, by itself, has a precise ontological signification. But, conversely, there is no ontological signification constructed other than through an investment of an ontic content” (Laclau 2014: 115). Thus, putting it in Heidegger’s terms, being never gives itself immediately as a transparent being with an objective referent; being is not one being among beings. In Laclau’s terms, being discloses itself always and only through the “ontic investment” (e.g., Laclau 2000: 79; Laclau 2005: 83–93). This means that communitarian fullness appears only through the investment in an ontic content, in one particularity. By untying itself from its differential signified, the Green party, for example, can totalise itself and represent absent communitarian fullness (i.e., pure being).

To recapitulate Laclau’s main point, hegemonic incarnations never reconcile society with itself. A particularity, embodying an absent society, is unable to

erase its partial nature completely. A hegemonic body, although it has acquired the status of the universal, cannot abolish its own particularity (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: xiii). In the end, universalisation always fails. The political ordering of the social is only an ontic “*substitute*” that necessarily fails to realise communitarian fullness. A hegemonic order “lives in [the] unresolvable tension between universality and particularity” (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: xiii). This inherent tension comes forth in the state of disorder where the universality of a hegemonic order is challenged and called into question. What exactly is perceivable in these extreme situations is “the *contingent* nature of so-called ‘objectivity’” (Laclau 1990a: 35; my emphasis). That, how the line between the universal and the particular, the identical and the different is fixed in a particular order, is always contingent. From Laclau and Mouffe’s point of view, social relations and identities can be rearticulated through the displacement of dichotomous categories. A hegemonic order never coincides with itself as long as it is cut across by the dichotomous tensions.

On Laclau and Mouffe’s account, it is possible to experience the unresolvable tensions at the antagonistic frontiers of social objectivity. The tensional relations between binary opposites manifest themselves through the antagonistic opposition that is neither the objective relation like “the real opposition” (*Realrepugnanz*) between real objects nor “the logical contradiction” between conceptual objects (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 122–124). The antagonistic frontier rather prevents social identities from being fully determined objectivities:

“Insofar as there is antagonism, I cannot be a full presence for myself. But nor is the force that antagonizes me such a presence: its objective being is a symbol of my non-being and, in this way, it is overflowed by a plurality of meanings which prevent its being fixed as full positivity” (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 125).

The antagonising force, due to which “I” cannot be “I”, blocks identity as pure presence. Social antagonism signals thus the necessary failure or lack in the constitution of identity. An identity as an enclosed and immediate reality is impossible. Yet, on the other side, the antagonistic limits function as the condition of possibility for any type of identity (including social formation as a whole). A partially fixed positivity of the social rests on the relation with the negative or with the non-relational element that is heterogeneous with respect to a symbolic order (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 127–129). Neither positivity nor negativity is a fully constituted reality, that is, pure positivity or pure negativity. The boundary between dichotomous opposites, as Laclau says, emerges through the “interplay of mutual subversions between the contingent and the necessary”, between the positive and the negative (Laclau 1990a: 27). This mutual subversion takes place in the zone of undecidability where political articulation, or the political act of institution, decides on the limit relation between dichotomous concepts and, by doing so, brings into existence the social as a political totality.

Political articulation, as a performative act, produces the constellation of dichotomies by determining for example the relation between inside and outside.

The chain of social differences, with which Laclau and Mouffe's hegemonic politics begins, is a discursive field without a fixed centre. This social field, divided into a series of struggles, lacks a natural representation. If there is not any self-grounding and immediate totality, then the only way how political articulation can construct the social bond is through the act of subversion (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 128). To achieve this, political articulation must produce a "subversive outside" (or a radical negativity) in opposition to which differential signifiers, or social fragments, are subverted and linked together into "the chain of equivalences" (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 127–134). The social bond is not based on a positive identity. From Laclau and Mouffe's perspective, the social field constructs itself as a signifying totality only by maintaining the equivalential relation with that *what it is not, with that what negates or antagonises all its being*. In this way, the equivalential chain manages to signify communitarian fullness in its absence. This lack or deprived presence, however, cannot be represented directly: "A simple absence does not require any type of representation, but if the absence as such is present within the structure, it requires access to the field of representation. This representation, however, cannot be a direct one, because what is represented is an absence" (Laclau 2014: 118). A signifier that incarnates an absent society creates a discursive-hegemonic order whose positivity is subversively mediated or reflexively determined by negativity. So, for Laclau and Mouffe, the positivity of the social depends on its relation with an antagonistic outside. Political articulation constructs discursively the boundary, or the antagonistic frontier, between binary opposites such as the universal and the particular.

All in all, for Laclau and Mouffe, social formation remains a precarious space that cannot be literally fixed once and for all as long as the antagonistic relation can be contested and displaced. That what is inside of an order and that what is outside of an order is precariously determined by political struggle.

2.3. Marchart's Political Ontology as a First Philosophy

Taking his cue from Laclau and Mouffe's position, Marchart illuminates the alternative approaches to the political put forward and defended by such thinkers such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, and Claude Lefort (Marchart 2007; Marchart 2010). Marchart's *Post-Foundational Political Thought*, furthermore, elucidates the implicit presuppositions of the post-Marxist idea of hegemony and, with the help of Heidegger's "ontological difference", rethinks "the political difference", foundationalism, and a first philosophy. In what follows, I summarise Marchart's main ideas.

Philosophy, in the traditional sense of metaphysics, does not study any particular ontic region of beings. In traditional terms, metaphysics transcends all

regional sciences (Marchart 2007: 162–163). Metaphysics, as the discipline of all disciplines, investigates all beings with respect to being. What is at stake in metaphysics is the being of beings. First philosophy serves as a founding discipline for regional disciplines like politics, sociology, and physics; to put it in other terms, ontology is a first philosophy (*prima philosophia*). According to Heidegger’s analysis of metaphysics, being has shown itself as a foundation on the basis of which the beingness of all being comes to light (Heidegger 2007: 69–70; Heidegger 2006: 65–66). A case in point is the father of modern philosophy – René Descartes – who, in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, founded the objectivity of sciences on the certainty of the “I”. For Descartes, the subject is the clear and distinct premise on the basis of which it is possible to derive deductively further conclusions. Reactivating some central intentions behind Descartes’s project, Edmund Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* reformulates first philosophy under the name of a “transcendental phenomenology” that aims at grasping the original activity of a transcendental subjectivity in the constitution of the “world”. Through the phenomenological return to the pure transcendental ego, Husserlian phenomenology aims at resolving the crisis of scientific disciplines.

When, however, the “onto-theo-logical” tradition of the West breaks down, then the philosophical discourse experiences the conditions of its own impossibility, the groundlessness of being (Derrida 2007: 354–355). In the article “Community and its Paradoxes: Richard Rorty’s ‘Liberal Utopia’”, Laclau concludes: “Once undecidability has reached the ground itself, once the organization of a certain camp is governed by a hegemonic decision [...] the realm of philosophy comes to an end and the realm of politics begins” (Laclau 1996: 123). A hegemonic politics grows on the ashes of metaphysics, on the impossibility of an ultimate foundation. Yet, the end of philosophy and the beginning of politics do not have to be seen as two successive and mutually *exclusive* events. Marchart interprets Laclau’s words in another way: “[I]n post-foundational political thought, the political, as the ‘outside’ of the philosophical, is folded back into the philosophical in the form of political ontology as *prima philosophia*” (Marchart 2007: 165–166; see Marchart 2010: 253–268; Marchart 2004; Marchart 1998). So, for Marchart, politics signals the impossibility of traditional metaphysics; and, at the same time, it reinstates a first philosophy. Metaphysics survives its own end as political ontology; or, as I would say, political ontology is one of the extreme possibilities of metaphysics.

To substantiate his claim, Marchart turns to Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of discourse according to which the *being* of all beings is discursive: “[I] will never encounter the object in its *naked* existence – such a notion is a mere abstraction; rather, that existence will always be given as articulated *within* discursive totalities” (Laclau & Mouffe 1990b: 104; my emphasis). Thus, we never come across with a mere “entity” existing outside of a discursive totality. For example, a piece of forest acquires a fixed meaning in a definite discursive totality (e.g., an ecological discourse). Because of the absence of an ultimate foundation, the chain of differences can be signified only through radical exclusion – or, in other words, through the antagonistic limits. For that reason, Marchart thinks that Laclau and

Mouffe's discursive conception of signification is "not only a theory of political signification but a 'political theory' of signification" (Marchart 2007: 146). All objects, if they are necessarily articulated in a discourse as moments, have at least *potentially* a political meaning. Discourse analysis that describes the formation of political identities and totalities is political ontology. In Marchart's opinion, furthermore, this political ontology is not just a regional ontology – namely, a regional ontology of politics. The being of all being, insofar as it is given discursively through political articulation, is political. A hegemonic approach, thought to its radical conclusions, leads to a first philosophy (Marchart 2007: 146–149).

Does political ontology return to a traditional first philosophy? Does Marchart's political ontology fall back into a kind of metaphysical foundationalism?

Politics, by bringing to light the absence of a final foundation, destroys the possibility of transcendent grounding of all beings. On the other hand, the philosophy of the political takes over the impossible position of a *prima philosophia* by stepping "in as a supplement for the absent ground" and serving as a quasi-transcendental condition of all being (Marchart 2007: 162–176). Political ontology is not limited to a ontology of politics: "What is at stake in political ontology is the political nature of being-qua-being, the political nature – in quasi-transcendental terms – of all possible beings, and not simply the nature of the 'good regime' or 'well-ordered society'" (Marchart 2007: 166). Political ontology that recognises the indispensability of a first philosophy serves as a "supplement" that fills in the empty place left behind by metaphysics. Marchart, however, does not restore the idea of pure being or a final ground. Political ontology is not a pure ontology of the political. "[O]ntology must aspire to be an ontology of all beings and yet, in doing so, it can proceed from a particular, 'ontic' region" (Marchart 2007: 83). This ontic region, a subsystem of society, is politics that contaminates the philosophy of the political.

So, Marchart's political ontology, if it is conceived as a first philosophy, does not deal with pure being; the philosophy of the political is contaminated by the ontic – by politics; we have thus a differential ontology (Marchart 2007: 159–162).¹¹ Politics, as one particular sphere of society, is understood in its difference from the political as the quasi-transcendental foundation of all beings. In conceptualising the political difference between the political and politics or, in German, between *das Politische* and *die Politik* or, in French, between *le*

¹¹ There is a tendency to focus on the philosophical "essence" of the political and to forget real politics. In "Politics or the Political? An Historical Perspective on a Contemporary Non-Debate", Kari Palonen asserts: "The search for the political, whether as a philosophical foundation or an 'ontological' instance of stability, may be understood as an attempt to create a legitimate place for the political in the order of things. From this point of view, the contingent – temporal, passing and rhetorical – aspect of the activity of politics necessarily remains unintelligible. The reverse side of this attitude lies in the lack of interest in the dirty world of 'mere' politics" (Palonen 2007: 76). In order to avoid this philosophical debasement of politics, Marchart deems it necessary to emphasize the importance of real politics.

politique and *la politique* or, in Estonian, between *poliitilisus* and *poliitika*, Marchart follows Heidegger's ontological difference between being and beings. In "Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik", Heidegger claims that the metaphysical tradition from its beginning has "forgotten" to reflect on the very difference between being and beings (Heidegger 2006: 56; Heidegger 1969: 50–51). What is at stake in being and beings is "difference as difference" or, to use Heidegger's neologism, "dif-ference" (*Unter-Scheid*). In the same way, Marchart constructs the political difference "in terms of, and by analogy to, the ontological difference in philosophical thought" (Marchart 2007: 171). The political signifies the ontological dimension of society; and politics, on the other side, is reserved for one ontic sphere of the social that can be thought as the public sphere, state apparatus, and so on. What, similarly to Heidegger, is at stake in the political difference is the very difference itself between the political and politics. Thus, the task is to think "the political difference as political difference" (Marchart 2007: 169–176). From Marchart's point of view, the political difference shows itself as the political differencing, as the never-ending play between the political and politics. There is "an unbridgeable chasm, an abyss, which, by *dividing* the ontopolitical from the ontic side of politics, at the very same time *unites* them in never-ending play" (Marchart 2007: 172; my emphasis). The play unites and, at the same time, separates the political and politics. As far as the political and politics never overlap, the process of differencing, or mutual grounding, can go on infinitely without the political being reduced to politics or politics being hypostatized into the political.

The political, as long as it is distinguished from politics, points to the fact that any type of transcendent grounding remains constitutively incomplete (Marchart 2007: 5). The neutral ground, rendering all beings (including society) transparent, is the impossible. In light of this, first philosophy appears as an impossible discipline. And yet, as we already know, Marchart does not throw "the science of all sciences" completely aside. Contrary to the complete elimination of metaphysics, the philosophy of the political does not lead beyond the metaphysical tradition, but rather subverts first philosophy and, in doing so, reinstates it again in the figure of political ontology. On Marchart's account, all beings come into presence and are present *via* the never-ending play between the political and politics:

"What the gap between the ontic and the ontological, between politics and the political indicates is precisely that no particular ontic politics can ever be grounded within the ontological realm of the political, but will always have to be articulated within the space opened by the play of political difference" (Marchart 2007: 159)

Thus, politics subverts the metaphysical reflection on pure being. In this way, I would claim that a first philosophy achieves the presence in its absence, i.e., in the state of privation as political ontology. Moreover, that is why Marchart does not simply negate being-as-foundation; in opposition to the anti-foundational

approach, foundationalism is subverted from within by contingency (Marchart 2007: 25–31).

The mutual conditioning of the political and politics indicates, for Marchart, one and the same thing: the impossibility of a final suture or, put differently, the impossibility of an ultimate foundation (Marchart 2007: 5). “Contingency”, “freedom”, “antagonism”, and “event” refer to the same impossibility as the political differencing. Yet, contrary to common perception, the disavowal of an ultimate foundation does not result in anti-foundationalism that, despite its aspirations, remains nevertheless trapped within the foundational framework (Marchart 2007: 11–13). Instead of negation, the metaphysical concept of foundation is affirmed in the dimension of nullity. At the end, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* makes a passing note: hegemony affirms “a ‘ground’ which lives only by negating its *fundamental* character” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 193; my emphasis). In my opinion, it is pertinent to say that the post-foundational concept of politics holds on to non-foundational foundations or, to use Bulters concept, “contingent foundations” (Butler 1992). In this sense, political post-foundationalism is the empty form of foundationalism.

In explicating his post-foundationalism, Marchart draws again upon Heidegger’s thinking. The seeds of post-foundationalism are already present in Heidegger’s thinking: post-foundationalism “owes so much to Martin Heidegger that it would not be exaggerated to regard Heidegger as one of the *main ‘founders’* of post-foundationalism” (Marchart 2007: 18; my emphasis). To substantiate this statement, Marchart draws attention to a seemingly tautological sentence from *Beiträge zur Philosophie*: “Der *Ab-grund* ist *Ab-grund*” (Heidegger 1989: 379; original emphasis). The emphases point to the chiasm in the foundation: the *Grund* (i.e., the foundation) is abyss; and inversely, *Abrgrund* (i.e., the abyss) is the foundation. The ground, if it is examined in detail, veils the abyss; and yet, the same abyss still functions as ground. Marchart offers the following interpretation of the abyssal foundation or of the groundless foundation:

“[T]he ground grounds only on the very basis of its abyssal character: that is to say, only via its very own absence, via what we might call its absencing or ‘de-grounding’. The a-byss is the never-ending deferral and withdrawal of ground, a withdrawal which belongs to the very nature of the latter and cannot be separated from it” (Marchart 2007: 19).

By pointing to the abyss underneath the ground, the concept of foundation is not negated as some kind of relict. The abyss rather constitutively defines the being of ground. In interpreting Heidegger, I think, Marchart’s political post-foundationalism nullifies and, at the same time, affirms the concept of foundation. With this double gesture, political grounding and “de-grounding” become two intertwined moments in the event of foundation. In other words, Marchart does not negate, but rather leaves the concept of foundation operative in its absence: “[T]he ground remains, to some extent, ‘operative’ as ground only on the basis of its very *absence*, which is why the absence of the ground must not be envis-

aged as ‘total’ cancellation, as ‘mere’ absence” (Marchart 2007: 18; my emphasis). In political post-foundationalism, the ground is present and operative in its absence. In this way, Marchart thinks that he succeeds in avoiding the paradoxes of anti-foundationalism.

The previous analysis reached a paradoxical conclusion: the foundation is abyss and the abyss is foundation. The same idea can be expressed with Derrida’s concept of undecidability (Laclau 1996: 123; Marchart 2007: 15–17, 28–29; see also the second section of the third chapter). When undecidability penetrates the metaphysical concept of foundation, then foundation deconstructs itself. And yet, this deconstruction does not annihilate foundation, but rather shows the (im)possible condition of foundation. Here, as many other Derrida’s texts, the condition of possibility overlaps with the condition of impossibility. But how does Marchart explicate this paradoxical statement? Post-foundationalism does not deny or declare impossible just any type of foundation, that is, foundation *per se*. What, rather, is called into question is the existence of an ultimate ground or of fully present and self-evident foundation (Marchart 2007: 13–18). All solid foundations, if studied with care, betray their contingent origin. Although post-foundationalism rejects an ultimate foundation, it still argues for contingent foundations. Contingency, attributed to foundation, is necessary; that is to say, *all* foundations are necessarily contingent. Contingent foundations, moreover, emerge in a specific historical constellation – “which is to say that the realization of contingency *as necessary* is the *non-necessary* outcome of empirical conditions” (Marchart 2007: 31; original emphasis). The impossibility of an ultimate foundation is, for Marchart, a quasi-transcendental presupposition of contingent foundations.

In other words, Marchart rejects an ultimate ground but defends the need for contingent foundations. Post-foundational political thought points to the impossibility of a fully realised foundation—or rather, the impossibility of a fully present society—but, on the other side, the political points to the infinite process of grounding. In the absence of an ultimate foundation, foundationalism operates as the excess of contingent grounds. Marchart writes: “[T]he pluralisation of grounds and of identities within the field of the social is the result of a radical impossibility, a radical gap between the ontic and the ontological, which has to be posited in order to account for the plurality in the ontic realm” (Marchart 2007: 15). So, the ontic plurality to which contingent foundations belong hinges on the *ontological* impossibility. From Marchart’s point of view, this exigency makes the political grounding into an endless task that, in principle, excludes the possibility of a fully present foundation. As far as a fulfilment is infinitely suspended, the incompleteness is a constitutive part of every ground. To recapitulate the main idea, the ontic plurality of contingent grounds sustains foundationalism in an idle state, that is, in the state of a “deferred” fulfilment.

3. GIORGIO AGAMBEN AND “THE HEIDEGGERIAN LEFT”

Heidegger is one of those authors whose work has exercised a substantial, and yet ambivalent, influence on philosophical thought in Italy.¹² The main contemporary thinkers that, on Marchart’s account, may be named “the Heideggerian Left of Italy” are Gianni Vattimo, Antonio Negri, Massimo Cacciari, and Roberto Esposito (Marchart 2010: 19). This heterogeneous group uses Heidegger’s ideas (e.g., nihilism and “the history of being”) as the “theoretical” basis for the emancipatory objectives of the Left. This use, however, is by no means univocal. Negri, for instance, categorically rejects Heideggerianism, while Vattimo, conforming to the thinking of *Ereignis* as the interruptive event in the foundationalist thought of metaphysics, seeks to free the project of the Left from its metaphysical assumptions (Vattimo 2009: 31–36). In doing so, Vattimo joyfully affirms nihilism as a positive possibility, as a chance. In this nihilistic condition, it becomes harder to justify inequality and domination in the name of some self-evident premises (Vattimo 2009). The socio-political emancipation is identified with the emancipation from the metaphysical conception of foundation, from the violence of foundation. To bring in another example, Cacciari argues for negativity that is not dialectically sublimated into a synthetic unity or, formulated in Marxist terms, that is not incorporated into the dialectical accumulation of capital as a negative moment (Mandarini 2009: 58). For Cacciari, nihilism, as the last manifestation of being, reveals the inherent negativity or the groundlessness of being. Being, as Agamben summarises, is *das Grundlose* “as much as being takes place in the nonplace of foundation (that is, in nothingness)” (Agamben 1991: xiii). Cacciari’s *Grundlose* is “the mystical” limit of all beings that cannot be brought into language. Negativity, as the mystical, is the ineffable foundation of metaphysics.

In what follows, I concentrate mainly on Agamben whose influence is noticeable across diverse disciplines such as jurisprudence, linguistics, political science, history, theology, political theory, and literary theory. The current subchapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I show how Agamben, employing Heidegger’s ideas, approaches Marx’s concept of “commodity fetishism”. The second section outlines the main influences on the development of post-foundational political ontology and Agamben’s thought; in particular, I concentrate on Carl Schmitt, Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques

¹² On Italian philosophy, see Borradori, G. (Ed.) 1988. *Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press; Hardt, M. & Virno, P. (Eds.) *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press; Chiesa, L. & Toscano, A. (Eds.) 2009. *The Italian Difference: Between Nihilism and Biopolitics*. Melbourne: re-press; and Esposito, R. 2012. *Living Thought: The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy*. Trans. by Z. Hanafi. California, CA: Stanford University Press.

Derrida. And the third section of the present subchapter summarises the main critical points that Marchart and Laclau raise regarding the work of Agamben.

3.1. Agamben as the Philosopher of the Heideggerian Left

The central themes of the Marxist tradition with which Agamben is occupied are the “classless society” (Agamben 2005a: 63–64; Agamben 2005b: 30–33), “the end of history” (Agamben 2000: 109–118), and “commodity fetishism” (Agamben 1993c: 36–40). Also the Marxist authors such as Walter Benjamin and Guy Debord are present in Agamben’s writings. In the same way, throughout his writings, Agamben returns again and again to the work of Heidegger. Consider, as an illustration, the topics such as the metaphysical difference between the animal and the human in *The Open: Man and Animal*, the problem of language examined in *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity* and *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, and the archaeology of the potentiality-actuality relation in *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty*, the critique of “being-towards-death” (*Sein-zum-Tode*) in *The Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, the perverse nature of aesthetics in *The Man without Content*, and the issue of “abandonment” (*Verlassenheit*) in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. In order to demonstrate Agamben’s reception of Marx and Heidegger, I show how Agamben gives a Heideggerian twist to Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism.

In *Reading Capital*, Louis Althusser, a renowned structural Marxist, suggests abandoning Karl Marx’s reflections on the “commodity fetishism” due to the embeddedness of the concept in the idealist philosophy of Hegel (Agamben 2000: 76). Against this approach, Guy Debord elaborates Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism in his work *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*. The development of the capitalist mode of production reaches to the extreme point in “the spectacle” where it

“is nothing more than the commodity’s last metamorphosis, in which exchange value has completely eclipsed use value and can now achieve the status of absolute and irresponsible sovereignty over life in its entirety, after having falsified the entire social production” (Agamben 2000: 76).

For Debord, as it appears from the previous quotation, the society of the spectacle is the extreme accumulation of the capital as a result of which the use-value is surpassed by the exchange-value of the produced object. In order to grasp the complete meaning of this claim, I take a short detour on Marx’s conception of commodity fetishism as presented in the first volume of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*.

What, according to Marx, is at stake in the capitalist phenomenon of fetishism is the transformation of our ordinary relation to things. There is nothing mysterious or fantastic about things that are produced to satisfy everyday human needs (Marx 1990: 163). Everything, however, is changed

when workers produce commodities for the commercial purpose of exchange. If the capitalist mode of production expands enough, then the value of the productive activity is determined by the exchange-value. The simple thing whose use-value is obliterated in favour of the exchange-value appears now as a supernatural and mysterious being. A commodity that, at first sight, appears as “an ordinary, sensuous thing” is in reality changed into “a thing which transcends sensuousness” (Marx 1990: 163). To illustrate commodity fetishism, Marx draws an analogy with religion: “There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands” (Marx 1990: 165). A belief in the objective existence of the supernatural disguises the fact that a monotheistic religion such as Christianity is actually a product of the human brain. Similarly, for Marx, the productive activity of the workers finds itself transformed into the objective characteristics of commodities. Thus, human labour is seen as an “objective characteristic of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things” (Marx 1990: 164–165). In the age of commodity fetishism, the human being does not recognise itself in its own work, in its productive activity. According to Marx, capitalism separates and alienates the human being from its productive praxis.

Moreover, it needs to be emphasised that, for Marx, commodity fetishism arises in the *social* realm as long as the activity of production is always social in nature. Commodity fetishism is, through and through, a *social* phenomenon of a capitalist state. In light of this, the previous analysis has to be made more specific. What exactly acquires a supernatural or fantastic being in the capitalist mode of production is men’s social being, i.e., the social activity of production:

“It is however precisely this finished form of the world of commodities – the money form – which conceals the *social* character of private labour and the *social* relations between the individual workers, by making those *relations appear as relations between material objects*, instead of revealing them plainly” (Marx 1990: 168–169; my emphasis).

The complex of social relations increasingly resembles the objective relations between things. And, for the capitalist, men’s labour force becomes just another commodity among many others. Direct social relations, and also the relations of domination, are made opaque. In the age of capital accumulation, the human being no longer recognises its “natural species-connection with other men” (Marx 1990: 173). *Commodity fetishism expresses therefore the extreme alienation of the human being from its social being.*

Marx’s model of fetishism plays a relevant role in Agamben’s line of reasoning (e.g., Agamben 1993c: 36–40). What, for Agamben, is at stake in the transformation of use-value into exchange-value is a symbolic investment into a thing. The spread of commodification brings into view the symbolic constitution of social reality; that is to say, the capitalist society does not appear as a

transparent and immediate reality. Social relations (including the relations of domination and the relation with things in general) are mediated by a symbolic investment, by the abstract exchange-value of produced objects (e.g., Marx 1990: 172–173). The experience of an unattainable thing accompanies commodity fetishism: “Just as the fetishist never succeeds in possessing the fetish wholly, because it is the sign of two contradictory realities, so the owner of a commodity will never be able to enjoy it simultaneously as both useful object and as value” (Agamben 1993c: 37). Because of the split between use-value and exchange value, it is impossible to assume the products of human labour. According to Agamben, the commodity appears as an unattainable thing whose presence is marked by absence. The fetishist enjoys the unattainable object in its negative presence. This symbolic character of commodity is used by Agamben as a point of reference for understanding the metaphysical conception of language. The Western conception of signification, like Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism, is cut across by the gap or the barrier between a signifier and a signified that signals “the impossibility of the sign to produce itself in the fullness of presence” (Agamben 1993c: 155). The sign, insofar as it is constitutively split and ruled by the difference, cannot manifest itself as a positive fullness. The movement of signification is established on the impossibility of grasping the positivity of the sign. The sign, as a divided reality, is present in its absence (see Agamben 1993c: 152–157).

On the basis of the previous analysis, it should be possible to understand what, for Agamben, is at issue in commodity fetishism or in Debord’s society of the spectacle. The fetishist character of commodity is not simply analogical to the conception of signification dominant in the Western tradition of metaphysics. The fact that we are dealing here with something more substantial is apparent in Agamben’s words:

“[T]he *spectacle is language*, the very communicativity and linguistic being of humans. This means that an integrated Marxian analysis should take into consideration the fact that capitalism (or whatever other name we might want to give to the process dominating world history today) not only aimed at the *expropriation of productive activity*, but also, and above all, at the *alienation of language itself, of the linguistic and communicative nature of human beings*, of that *logos* in which Heraclitus identifies the Common” (Agamben 2000: 82; my emphasis).

Therefore, the extreme stage of capitalism corresponds not only to the domination of commodity form over use-value, but also to the alienation of the human being from language. From Agamben’s point of view, the generic social being of humans (or, as Marx would put it, *Gattungswesen*, “species-being”) expresses itself above all in language, in the communicative being of language (Agamben 2000: 84). What the common thing is that human beings share is the communicative being. In its inherent nature, the human is a linguistic being. But the spectacle expropriates exactly this common “essence”, the communicativity into “an autonomous sphere” (Agamben 2000: 115). In this way, human beings are blocked from having the access to language itself. For Agamben, this type

of alienation reaches its extreme when language is experienced as revealing “the nothingness of all things”; that is, the age of commodity fetishism is the age of nihilism where human beings are unable to grasp their social essence, that is, language. Language is experienced as an ungraspable, unattainable thing (Agamben 1999: 45–46).

Thus, the rise of commodity fetishism is co-original with the “essence” of nihilism which, as Heidegger argues in his readings of Nietzsche, marks the culmination of metaphysics. Nihilism unveils the groundlessness, or the nothingness, accompanied by the metaphysical quest to ground the beingness of beings. As Agamben argues in *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, the original place where being takes place lacks foundation (Agamben 1991: xiii). The metaphysical chain of “onto-theo-logical” fundamentals rests on “the negative foundation”. “The end of metaphysics” signifies the culmination and exhaustion of the metaphysical tradition through “the unveiling and the devastating arrival of its final negative ground at the very heart of ethos, humanity’s proper dwelling place. This arrival is nihilism” (Agamben 1991: xiii). For Agamben, this negative ground of metaphysics is rooted in the experience of the ineffable that takes place in “the event of language”.

What has determined the “essence” of metaphysics throughout its history is the particular experience of language: “[M]etaphysics is that experience of language that, in every speech act, grasps the disclosure of that dimension, and in all speech acts, experiences above all the “marvel” that *language exists*” (Agamben 1991: 25; my emphasis). The structural theory of the sign, for instance, expresses this dimension through the barrier that conveys the passage between a signified and a signifier, between semiotics and semantics, between *langue* and *parole*. There is a linguistic unit, an empty sign that binds together two opposing poles. This empty sign is called a pronoun or, in Jakobson’s terms, a “shifter” that, according to Agamben, indicates the pure event of discourse, the taking place of language. Before something is said, pronouns demonstrate the being of language (Agamben 1991: 19–26). As Descartes’s “I”, Hegel’s “diese”, and Heidegger “da” demonstrate, shifters occupy an eminent place in the terminology of metaphysics. Summarising his position, Agamben gives a linguistic twist to Heidegger’s ontological difference: “The opening of the *ontological* dimension (being, the world) corresponds to the pure taking place of language as an originary event, while the *ontic* dimension (entities, things) corresponds to that which, in this opening, is said and signified” (Agamben 1991: 26). If attention is turned only to that what is said in speech acts, one fails to notice the event of language itself. *Ousia*, being, indicates the event of language that, as the short exposition of commodity fetishism demonstrated, is defined by negativity. The fact that language takes place falls into oblivion in the said. Thus, for Agamben, the event of language is the presupposition of all presuppositions that cannot be named by the name. The advent of nihilism discloses the negativity at the heart of metaphysics – i.e., the impossibility of bringing language into language (see, for instance, Agamben 1999: 205–220; Agamben 1993c: 141–149).

In contrast to Heidegger, however, Agamben does not want to leave the ontological presupposition of language unsaid. The problem arises in Heidegger's seminars at Thor-en-Provence which Agamben attended in 1966 and in 1968. This encounter is recollected in several writings (e.g., Agamben 2000: 139). *The Idea of Prose* recalls the seminar with the following words:

“At Le Thor, Heidegger held his seminar in a garden shaded by tall trees. At times, however, we left the village, walking in the direction of Thouzon or Rebanquet, and the seminar then took place in front of a small hut, hidden away in the midst of an olive grove. One day, when the seminar neared to its end and the students crowded around him, pressing him with questions, Heidegger merely remarked: “You can see my limits; I can’t”” (Agamben 1985: 59).

The limits, which the students are supposed to see, are the limits within which Heidegger's thinking unfolds itself (Agamben 1985: 59). This truth, whose latent presence destines and inspires thinking, is the non-said in the said. Heidegger cannot say the limits of his own thinking. Later, Agamben will understand the non-said as the event of language that, as an ineffable thing, withdraws and conceals itself in every speech act (Agamben 1991). Language presupposes itself as something that cannot be brought into language as an objective being. The task, facing Heidegger's students, is to expose the internal limit of thinking (Agamben 1985: 60). Agamben deems it necessary to say the ineffable thing, to “overcome” the linguistic alienation of human beings. The extreme alienation conceals thus a positive possibility – the possibility to appropriate the productive activity of men or, as Agamben would say, the linguistic essence of human beings:

“[T]he age in which we live is also that in which for the first time it becomes possible for human beings to experience their own linguistic essence – to experience, that is, not some language content or some true proposition, but language *itself*, as well as the very fact of speaking” (Agamben 2000: 85; original emphasis).

Thus, from Agamben's point of view, language can be brought into language. In order to comprehend the linguistic essence of human beings, it is necessary to conceive what it means to have a potentiality to speak. The meaning of this claim becomes clearer in the fifth chapter of this dissertation where I explicate in detail Agamben's understanding of potentiality.

Agamben's earlier works on language laid the groundwork for the *homo sacer* project. The unsayable foundation of metaphysics is inseparably linked with politics insofar as the Greek polis is the proper dwelling place – that is, the *ethos* – where the connection between *phone* and *logos*, between a living being and language, or between bare life and political life is at stake (see, for instance, Agamben 1985: 7–8). In order to cope with the consumption of metaphysics, it is not therefore enough to pose anew the question of being; it has to be accompanied by an effort to interrogate the concealed link between metaphysics and politics. As Agamben says in *Homo Sacer*: “Brought to the limit of pure

Being, metaphysics (thought) passes over into politics (into reality), just as on the threshold of bare life, politics steps beyond itself into theory” (Agamben 1998: 182). The advent of nihilism reveals not only the non-said, but also the original element of a juridico-political tradition – that is to say, *homo sacer* who dwells at the threshold of a secular and of a sacred order and who “*may be killed and not yet sacrificed*” (Agamben 1998: 8; original emphasis). This structural interrelation of politics and metaphysics comes to light at the end of metaphysics: “The coming thought will have thus to try and take seriously the Hegelo-Kojévian (and Marxian) theme of the end of history as well as the Heideggerian theme of the entrance into *Ereignis* as the end of the history of being” (Agamben 2000: 110). If one component – either the end of state or the end of history – is disregarded, then one does not understand the nihilistic completion of metaphysics. The end of history in *Ereignis* coincides with “the withering away of the state” (see the first section of the fifth chapter).

3.2. Other Influences on Agamben and Post-Foundational Political Ontology

Along with Heidegger, Agamben and political post-foundationalists engage with authors such as Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. This abundance of literary references creates a fruitful ground for all kinds of interpretations. Agamben’s project, for instance, can be seen as a development of Benjamin’s messianic conception of history, as an extension and deepening of Foucault’s biopolitics, as a critical study of Derrida’s deconstruction, and as a critical response to Schmitt’s concept of sovereignty. In what follows, the current section briefly summarises these influences on Agamben’s philosophy and on Laclau and Marchart’s post-Marxist approach.

Carl Schmitt is a controversial figure who was associated with the inner circles of Nazi Germany. Leaving his opportunistic adventures aside, Schmitt’s political and juridical thought has exercised a substantial influence on a wide spectrum of political and legal theory including the tradition of Marxism. Mouffe and Laclau and Marchart have engaged directly with Schmitt’s views.¹³ What, in my opinion, has fascinated the Left and, in particular, political post-

¹³ See, for instance, Mouffe, C. 1999. (Ed.) *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*. London: Verso; Laclau, E. 2005. On “Real” and “Absolute” Enemies. In *The New Centennial Review*, vol. 5, no 1, 1–12; Marchart, O. 2007. *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 41–48; Lipping, J. 2016. Laclau and Schmitt on Political Form. In Devenney, M. (Ed.) *Thinking the Political: Ernesto Laclau and the Politics of Post-Marxism*. London: Routledge; and Dyrberg, T. B. 2009. The leftist fascination with Schmitt and the esoteric quality of “the political”. In *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 36, no. 6, 649–669. On Schmitt see, for example, Ojakangas, M. 2004. *A Philosophy of Concrete Life: Carl Schmitt and the Political Thought of Late Modernity*. Sophie: Jyväskylä; Rasch, W. 2004. *Sovereignty and its Discontents: On the Primacy of Conflict and the Structure of the Political*. London: Birkbeck Law Press; Marder, M. 2010. *Groundless Existence: The Political Ontology of Carl Schmitt*. London: Continuum.

foundationalism is the idea of “the political” (*das Politische*) in Schmitt’s *Der Begriff des Politischen*. The infamous work starts with an enigmatic statement: “*Der Begriff des Staates setzt den Begriff des Politischen voraus* [The concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political]” (Schmitt 2009: 19). With the appearance of non-state entities (e.g., revolutionary parties, partisans), the modern state loses the monopoly over the political, over deciding who the *existential* enemy is. The late modernity has reached to a junction where the political is not by definition necessarily concerned with all things associated with the aggregate of state apparatuses and practices. In contrast to a liberal way of dividing the social into separate fields, the political does not signify a particular *subsphere* of society or, in more general terms, an *ontic* subfield of all beings (Schmitt 2009: 36). From my perspective, this substantiated adjective rather names that what distinguishes a political institution from other types of social organisations, that is to say, that what constitutes one specific institution as political institution (e.g., the state as state). Using non-objectivist terms, the political signifies *being* or, better, the *political* nature of being that has constituted the political beingness of the state. Schmitt, to be more precise, formulates the political as a “criterion” (*Kriterium*) that marks a decision upon the friend-enemy relation (Schmitt 2009: 25). The criterion does not single out any specific sphere as long as the groupings along the enemy-friend line can achieve a degree of “intensity” in the diverse realms such as economy, religion, and technology (Schmitt 2009: 35–42). What has captured attention of the contemporary Left is precisely *the ontological primacy of conflict* or “the autonomy of the political” in respect to the economical, the religious, and the moral. With regard to this similarity, however, there is one important difference: whereas Schmitt covers over the political in the domestic context in favour of an international politics, the post-foundational Left argues for the conflictual being of social formations (Schmitt 2009: 50–54).

This non-objectivist approach is present in Schmitt’s critique of legal theory with which Agamben occupies himself in many works (Schmitt 1996: 23–40; see, for example, Agamben 1998: 15–29; Agamben 1999: 160–174; Agamben 2003: 52–64). In *Politische Theologie*, Schmitt proposes an infamous definition of sovereignty: “*Souverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet* [Sovereign is that who decides upon the state of exception]” (Schmitt 1996: 13). To guarantee the validity of a juridico-political order, the constitution includes articles regulating when and on what conditions the Law can be suspended. The sovereign is, for Schmitt, precisely that who judges if “the state of necessity” (*Notstand*) is imminent or not. When an existing order is perceived to be under threat, then the sovereign can declare the state of exception (*Ausnahmezustand*) and, by doing so, interrupts the normal application of the Law. Yet, on Schmitt’s account, the state of exception is not the same thing as a chaos, as anarchy (Schmitt 1996: 18). The state of exception rather marks the *limit zone where a juridical order maintains itself in a condition of privation*. The Law, as Agamben emphasises, is in force but not applied. Moreover, the state of exception reveals an independent juridical element – i.e., the “decision” – that is independent from

the legal norm and that cannot be derived deductively from the legal norm (Schmitt 1996: 18–19). The juridical system is thus not a closed corpus of juridical norms purified from everything non-legal or extra-legal. The validity of the juridical order rests on the sovereign who, topologically speaking, is situated neither inside nor outside, but rather at the undecidable limit of a juridical order (Agamben 1998: 15–17). Thus, in Schmitt’s point of view, a juridical system, insofar as it is *founded* on the sovereign decision on the undecidable, is not a closed normative objectivity as legal positivism mistakenly thinks. What, for Agamben, is at stake in the zone of undecidability is the very limit form of relation between outside and inside, *zoe* and *bios*, life and law (Agamben 1998: 26–29). The sovereign power decides on the undecidable and determines the constitutive nexus between the biopolitical model and the juridico-political model of power. By elaborating Schmitt’s state of exception, Agamben connects two seemingly opposite conceptions of power: the juridical concept of sovereignty and Michel Foucault’s analysis of biopolitics.

In political post-foundationalism, Laclau and Mouffe investigate and criticise Foucault’s notions of discourse and subjectivity (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 105–122); and, subsequently, Marchart examines and criticises Foucault’s extreme nominalism and agonistic understanding of social conflicts (Marchart 2013: 238–262). Arguably, the opposite is also true: Foucault would be critical of the post-structural project of hegemony.¹⁴ In contrast to this, however, Foucault is a scholar from whom Agamben has “learned a great deal” (Agamben 2009: 7). Besides the methodological principles such as archaeology, Agamben is influenced by Foucault’s investigation of biopolitics. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* and, subsequently, in the lecture course published under the title *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault distinguishes the biopolitical model of power from the dominant juridical model of power founded on the concepts of the state and sovereignty (Foucault 1990; Foucault 2003: 239–265). In contrast to the sovereign’s *negative* power to decide over the life and death of his and her subjects, biopolitics presents itself as a positive – i.e., *productive* – force that aims at developing, optimising, maximising, and maintaining natural life processes (Foucault 1990: 135–137). Agamben distinguishes two directions of research in Foucault:

“[O]n the one hand, the study of the *political techniques* (such as the science of police) with which the State assumes and integrates the care of the natural life of

¹⁴ In the article “Beyond the State, Beyond the Desert”, Sandro Mezzadra argues that Foucault was suspicious of the concept of the political (Mezzadra 2011). It is no wonder that Foucault’s ideas have functioned as the starting point for the critique of hegemony (e.g., Antonio Negri). Taking a cue from Foucault’s analysis of biopolitics, Cultural Studies talks about “post-hegemony”. On post-hegemony, see Beasley-Murray, J. 2010. *Post-Hegemony: Political Theory and Latin America*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota; and Lash, S. 2007. Power after Hegemony: Cultural Studies in Mutation? In *Theory, Culture, and Society*, vol. 24, no. 3, 55–78; Ardit, B. 2007. Post-Hegemony: Politics Outside the Usual Post-Marxist Paradigm. In *Contemporary Politics*, vol. 13, no. 3, 205–226.

individuals into its very centre; on the other hand, the examination of the *technologies of the self* by which processes of subjectivization bring the individual to bind himself to his own identity and consciousness and, at the same time, to an external power (Agamben 1998: 5; original emphasis).

While the political techniques are occupied with the large scale trends (e.g., birth rate, mortality rate) in the population, the practices of subjectivisation examine how individuals bind their identity and bodies to power (e.g., “confession”). Whereas, for Foucault, biopolitics is fundamentally at odds with the juridical approach to power, *Homo Sacer* seeks to reveal “the hidden point of intersection between the juridico-political and bio-political conceptions of power” (Agamben 1998: 6). This original link comes to light at the limits of a juridico-political order – i.e., in “the state of exception” – where the normal functioning of law is suspended and where law refers to life (Agamben 1998: 25–29). Moreover, as Agamben argues, the ontological structure of the exception manifests itself first in the Greek polis where *zoe* and *bios*, a simple natural life and a political existence, exclusion and inclusion, are decided for the first time (Agamben 1998: 1). Contrary to how it may look like, biopolitics is therefore not a purely modern phenomenon *par excellence*. From Agamben’s point of view, the hidden link between life and law has defined the juridico-political tradition from the beginning.

Derrida is another important thinker that now and then pops up in the works of the Heideggerian Left. I start with Laclau and Mouffe who draw from many principal ideas of deconstruction such as the critique of the sign, “undecidability”, “hauntology”, and a “constitutive outside”; in addition, Laclau has written an essay “The Time is Out of Joint” on Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* (Laclau 1996: 66–83). To explicate Derrida’s reception, I concentrate on the main ideas of Derrida’s influential article “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”. From Derrida’s perspective, metaphysics has conceived “the structurality of the structure” or, differently put, the beingness of all beings on the basis of a “transcendental signified” (or pure being) that renders the structure present as a full objectivity (Derrida 2001: 351–353). By seeking to erase the signifier-signified split within the sign, metaphysics sutures the discursive field of difference as a coherent and self-identical totality. If, however, there is no structuring centre or no “transcendental signified” or, simply, no transparent sign, then the objective essence of the structure is not fixable once and for all. This open-ended structure, as Derrida claims, does not spring from the empirical infiniteness of a discursive field, but rather from the *finite* constitution of language: “If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because *the nature of the field* – that is, language and a *finite* language – excludes totalization” (Derrida 2001: 365; my emphasis). Language, due to its finite character, is structurally unable to constitute itself as a full positivity. Within language, there is no direct and immediate access to a discursive outside or to pure being on the basis of which to grasp the structure as a reconciled

being in full presence. *The finiteness of linguistic beings (i.e., human beings) is primarily embedded in the finiteness of language.* For that reason, a metaphysical totalisation, as long as we inevitably dwell in the particular context, or medium, of language, is impossible; and yet, for Derrida, the same totalisation is absolutely necessary if signification is to exist at all (Derrida 2001: 365). Thus, paradoxically, a transcendental signified – or, in other words, pure being and transcendental grounding of all beings – is necessary and impossible, at the same time. The finiteness of language makes signification as a fully present being impossible; on the other hand, the same finiteness also makes it possible. Being, as long as it is mediated by the linguistic play of differences, appears less than pure being; an ultimate foundation appears less than a self-grounding and self-evident foundation. In more general terms: if one glimpses at the linguistic being of humans, one experiences the impossibility and, at the same time, necessity of metaphysical discourse (Derrida 2001: 354). To sum up: Derrida's deconstruction delineates and exposes in my view the zone of undecidability between necessity and impossibility, a signified and a signifier, a pure presence and a mere absence.

In developing the concept of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe take their cue from Derrida's ideas (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: xi; Laclau 1996: 36–40; Marchart 2007: 146–149). Laclau & Mouffe, like Derrida, accept the fact that there is no transcendental signified. This conveys to them that the discursive field of social differences lacks a metaphysical grounding in some sort of objective principles (e.g., economics, religion, moral). This non-objective or non-sutured character of the social is visible in the antagonistic limits of society. For Laclau and Mouffe, social antagonisms, or at least the latent presence of conflicts, point to the impossibility of society as a full presence (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 122–127; Laclau 1990a: 17). Society, as communitarian fullness, is an impossible object. As with Derrida, this impossibility does not point to a bare absence of social reality. A social totality, although it is impossible as the full positivity of a signifying structure, is still necessary. According to Laclau and Mouffe, social formation springs from a hegemonic fixation of meaning, a hegemonic fixation of identities. The social objectivity, lacking a determined essence, is constructed politically out of non-fixed parts of the discursive terrain. Laclau and Mouffe think that a discursive-hegemonic order substitutes for the absent communitarian fullness or, in general, pure being. The social expansion of undecidability therefore creates the realm of politics: “Once *undecidability* has reached the ground itself [...] the realm of philosophy comes to an end and the realm of politics begins” (Laclau 1996: 123; my emphasis).

In the same manner, Marchart's explication of post-foundational political ontology draws upon Derrida's ideas on the process of signification (Marchart 2007: 15–17). In our abandonment to the infinite play of signs, pure being is, for Derrida, impossible but, at the same time, being (or a signifying structure) is also necessary. Laclau (and Mouffe) interpreted this statement as meaning the impossibility of society as a full presence and, at the same time, the necessity of

social totality. Marchart adopts the same strategy clearly evident from the following citation: Derrida's quasi-transcendentalism

“resides in a sort of double movement which indicates the necessity both to *uphold* transcendental questioning – a strengthening of the philosophical view vis-à-vis the purely empirical approach – and to *weaken* it from within, by defining the condition of possibility of something as that thing's simultaneous condition of impossibility” (Marchart 2007: 29; my emphasis).

Undecidability, or the non-objectivity of a discursive reality, pertains to the metaphysical concept of foundation – that is to say, being-as-foundation. The absence of a transcendental signified is nothing less than the absence of an ultimate foundation. What, for Marchart, is at stake in Derrida's deconstruction and Laclau's account of hegemony is the impossibility of a transcendental grounding of all beings (Marchart 2007: 15–18). This claim, as the quotation above indicates, does not imply that there would not be any foundations or, better, that we live in a totally chaotic world lacking any suture. Like Derrida sticks to being in the weakened form and like Laclau sticks to the concept of society, Marchart sticks to the metaphysical concept of foundation. Contrary to an anti-foundational approach, the metaphysical grounding is both upheld and weakened. Otherwise stated, Marchart makes the impossibility of an ultimate foundation into a quasi-transcendental condition of possibility of contingent foundations (see the third section of the second chapter). The objectivity of the ontic realm depends on a quasi-ontological presupposition: the ontological impossibility of an ultimate foundation (Marchart 2007: 15). Additionally, leaving aside the political twist, Marchart follows Derrida's “logic” to the end. Namely, post-foundational political ontology signifies the impossibility of metaphysics, but on the other hand, political ontology materialises a general ontology in a weakened form. To describe this, Marchart uses Derrida's concept of “hauntology”: “It is only in the sense of *hauntology*, that is to say, as an ontology lacking its very object (being-as-foundation), that the term ontology may still be employed” (Marchart 2007: 63; original emphasis). Post-foundational political ontology that assumes the status of first philosophy is hauntology.

In the same way as Laclau and Marchart, Agamben discusses and calls into question many of Derrida's ideas such as the deconstruction of the sign, the conceptions of messianism, the nature of the Law, and the philosophical underpinnings of friendship (see Agamben 1991: 38–40; Agamben 1993c: 152–157; Agamben 1999: 205–219; Agamben 2005b: 102–104).¹⁵ Yet, differently from Laclau and Marchart's post-Marxist reinterpretation of deconstruction, Agamben seeks to distance himself from Derrida's approach. To substantiate

¹⁵ On the debate between Agamben and Derrida, see Derrida, J. 2009. *The Beast and the Sovereign* (Volume 1). Trans. By G. Bennington. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; Derrida, J. 2005. *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*. Trans. by P. Brault & M. Naas. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; and Kevin A. 2014. *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction*. New York: Fordham University Press.

the claim, I stop on one of the main points of their confrontation: the problem of undecidability. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben makes the following remark:

“The prestige of deconstruction in our time lies precisely in its having conceived of the entire text of tradition as being in force without significance, a being in force whose strength lies essentially in its *undecidability* [...] But it is precisely concerning the sense of this being in force (and of the state of exception that it inaugurates) that *our position distinguishes* itself from that of deconstruction” (Agamben 1998: 54; my emphasis).

To read deconstructively the fundamental text of the Western tradition means to conceive the tradition in a state of undecidability, as “being in force without significance”.¹⁶ Through the deconstructive exposure of undecidability at the heart of the text, the tradition, in which we dwell, is nullified and affirmed in one and the same gesture. Derrida’s early work *Speech and Phenomena*, for instance, exposes the impossibility of the sign insofar as it consists of two fundamentally different parts: a signifier and a signified or, in Husserl’s terminology, “expression” (*Ausdruck*) and “indication” (*Anzeigung*). The structure of all structures – i.e., the sign – is fundamentally split into two (Agamben 1993c: 135–139; Derrida 1973). Because of its non-coincidence with itself, the sign constitutively fails to be a fully present objectivity. According to Agamben, this split, moreover, is marked by a “barrier” between a signifier and a signified (S/s). The barrier, as Agamben explicates, is the zone of undecidability where the articulation or passage between a signifier and a signified takes place (Agamben 1993c: 155–157). In my opinion, this zone of undecidability is a place of decision. Like Husserl, one can decide to develop a concept of signification that emphasises the signified and that, through “the phenomenological epoché”, seeks to bracket and downplay the signifier (or indicative notions). Alternatively, like Derrida, one can decide to emphasise the element of signifier and to attribute primacy to “writing” and “letter” (Agamben 1993c: 155–157). Either approach, however, stays within the metaphysical tradition insofar as the barrier – or the event of signification – is left unquestioned:

“From the point of view of signification, metaphysics is nothing but the forgetting of the originary difference between signifier and signified. Every semiology that fails to ask why the barrier that establishes the possibility of signifying should itself be resistant to signification, falsifies, with that omission, its own most authentic intention” (Agamben 1993c: 137).

So, on Agamben’s account, Derrida repeats the negative structure of metaphysics by failing to reflect on the barrier or on the zone of undecidability that makes signification possible but is in itself unsignifiable. Deconstruction dis-

¹⁶ Agamben borrows the phrase “being in force without significance” (*Geltung ohne Bedeutung*) from Gershom Scholem who uses it in a letter to Benjamin investigating Kafka’s parable “Before the Law” (Agamben 1998: 49–58).

closes the signifier-signified barrier as the internal limit of language where signification is broken down but still operative without significance. Language, like the juridico-political order, exposes itself at its extreme limits where signification affirms its power to signify (Agamben 1998: 21). So, with the exposure of the barrier, signification becomes visible at the zero point of its content. A case in point is an empty signifier that signifies the presence of signification beyond any particular content. From Agamben's point of view, however, it is not enough to leave the process of signification in force without significance. The zone of undecidability is the philosophical problem of our age – and not its solution as Derrida and political post-foundationalists tend to presuppose.

To recapitulate, the deconstructive strategy of reading exposes the undecidability of the text or the breakdown of signification due to which the sign fails to realise itself as full positivity. The same void, however, sets and keeps signification in an endless movement that is able to produce ontic substitutes for pure being or, better, for language itself (Agamben 2005b: 102–103). Without offering any hope of escape, Derrida abandons human beings within an infinite play of signs or within an infinite self-signification of language that is never able to catch up with itself. At the point of its breakdown, signification continues to run empty and, in this way, it is present as an empty form. The zero-degree signification signifies only itself without, however, being able to bring itself into language (Agamben 2005b: 103). So, as Agamben argues, the barrier between a signified and signifier is widely open but absolutely impassable. In a similar way, Derrida nullifies the eschatological content of messianism as long as the messianic does not mean the arrival of the promise, the event of full meaning; by signifying a pure form of openness to a “radical otherness”, messianism is maintained in the zero-point of its content (see Laclau 1996: 73–74). This is Derrida's “messianic without messianism” that, according to Agamben, suspends “the messianic fulfilment”: “Deconstruction is a *thwarted* messianism, a suspension of the messianic” (Agamben 2005b: 103; my emphasis). For Agamben, however, the messianic fulfilment is not the same thing as an eschatological fulfilment, that is, the promised closure of the gap between a signified and a signified (Agamben 2005b: 62–63; 100–104). The messianic fulfilment does not produce any name for the name. What, on the contrary, takes place through the messianic fulfilment is a revocation of the zero-degree signification: messianism “fulfils and deactivates the very excess of signification over every signified, it *extinguishes* languages (I Cor. 13:8)” (Agamben 2005b: 137; my emphasis). The deactivation does not mean therefore that the very split or undecidability between signified and signifier would be closed by some new transcendental signified.

To elaborate the theme of messianism, I turn to Agamben's interpretation of Benjamin's “Über den Begriff der Geschichte” where he makes an enigmatic statement in the eighth thesis: “[T]he tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of exception’ [*Ausnahmezustand*] in which we live is the rule” (Benjamin 1977: 254–255). In order to understand the meaning of this sentence, we have to go back to Schmitt who, as we know, confines the state of exception

to the limit sphere of a juridico-political order. The exception, as long as it is limited temporally and spatially, is demarcated from the rule. The validity of a juridical order is guaranteed by the sovereign who has the power to declare the state of exception. For Schmitt, thus, the exception safeguards the working of the rule in normal conditions. Benjamin, however, objects to Schmitt's vision by claiming that the state of exception has crossed spatiotemporal boundaries and become the prevailing normality (Agamben 2005a: 57–59). For that reason, it is not possible to distinguish the rule from the exception, the outside from the inside, violence from right. At the time when Benjamin was writing, Nazi Germany proved a ghastly example of this. A real state of exception confronts us with the zone of undecidability or the nexus between the exception and the norm. In the zone of undecidability, the juridico-political order is not annihilated, but rather maintained in the state of privation as the empty form. In a prolonged state of exception, a juridical order still enforces itself beyond its normal application. In order to struggle against the oppressive forces of fascism, Benjamin sets the task of bringing about “the *real* state of exception” that would revoke even the nullified law, the nothing (Benjamin 1977: 255; Agamben 2005a: 86–88). This revocation halts the articulation that connects and differentiates the exception from the rule, a signifier from a signified. Following Benjamin, for example, Agamben deems it necessary to render inoperative the empty form of relation that connects and differentiates life and law, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe*. Agamben illustrates the case in point with the help of Kafka's parable “Before the Law”:

“The messianic task of the man from the country (an of the youth who stands before the door in the miniature) might then be precisely that of making the virtual state of exception real, of compelling the doorkeeper to close the door of the Law (the door of Jerusalem). For the Messiah will be able to enter only after the door is closed, which is to say, after the Law's being in force without significance is at the end” (Agamben 1998: 56–57).

Therefore, according to Agamben, the man from the country, contrary to how it may seem, manages to close the nullified law that is open but impassable. This messianic task resonates with our task of rendering inoperative the empty form of the Law or, analogically, a zero-degree signification endorsed by Derrida's deconstruction. By deactivating the hollowed out Law, a juridical order is not simply eliminated. The deactivation is rather a fulfilment: “[T]he Messiah's arrival signifies the *fulfilment* and the *complete* consumption of the Law” (Agamben 1998: 56; my emphasis). The revocation coincides with the fulfilment of the Law. Agamben's messianic gesture “revokes” and “retrieves” at the same time (see the second section of the fifth chapter). In my opinion, this double movement becomes fully intelligible with the help of the “modal” categories – that is, potentiality and actuality – that I investigate in the final chapter of the introduction.

3.3. Marchart and Laclau's Critical Assessments of Agamben's Work

The Heideggerian Left, as we know, is an umbrella label for diverse – not to say conflicting – perspectives. After laying a post-foundational groundwork, Marchart's *Post-Foundational Political Thought* offers a critical analysis of Lefort, Nancy, and Badiou's political thinking. The German version of the same work, *Die Politische Differenz*, adds a section "*Politische Differenz ohne Politik: Giorgio Agamben*" [Political Difference without Politics: Giorgio Agamben] (Marchart 2011: 221–241). Along similar lines, Laclau engages with *Homo Sacer* in "Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?" (Laclau 2014: 207–220). The present section extracts three major critical points from Marchart and Laclau's analyses of Agamben with which my articles are intensely occupied.¹⁷

In Agamben's opinion, the subaltern position in which politics nowadays finds itself is explainable by the fact that politics "has been losing sight of its own ontological status, it has failed to confront the transformations that gradually have emptied out its categories and concepts" (Agamben 2000: ix). Contemporary thinking is confronted with the task of reconsidering traditional concepts, such as sovereignty, human rights, and democracy. Agamben aims at giving back to the fundamental concepts of politics their lost ontological standing. In Marchart's point of view, Agamben's re-ontologisation brings the never-ending play between the political and politics to a halt (Marchart 2010: 238–239). This "standstill" brings with itself either of the following consequences: "They all seek to put the play of the political difference to a halt, thereby either *reducing* the political to politics or *hypostatizing* politics into the political" (Marchart 2007: 161; my emphasis). The hypostatisation, in particular, takes place in the *homo sacer* project: "What in the case of Agamben is observable is the implicit reduction of the political difference to the ontological side of the political and the simultaneous emptying of the ontic side of politics from all meaning and content" (Marchart 2010: 238–239). Failing to take into account the contingent configuration of power relations, Agamben delimits the differential play to the ontological side. The strategic element of politics is replaced with "means without end", i.e., with "pure means" (Agamben 2000). By downplaying concrete political circumstances, Agamben falls prey to a passive intellectualism that is busy building abstract genealogies and grand critiques of the juridico-political tradition (Marchart 2010: 222). For this reason,

¹⁷ Marchart and Laclau, of course, are not the only ones who have drawn attention to Agamben's failure to think politics. See, for instance, Rasch, W. 2007. From Sovereign Ban to Banning Sovereignty. In Calarco, M. & DeCaroli, S. (Eds.) *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty & Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; Rasch, W. 2009. The Structure of the Political vs. the Politics of Hope. In Strathausen, C. (Ed.) *A Leftist Ontology: Beyond Relativism and Identity Politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press; and Geulen, E. 2009. The Function of Ambivalence in Agamben's Reontologization of Politics. In Strathausen, C. (Ed.) *A Leftist Ontology: Beyond Relativism and Identity Politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Marchart claims that Agamben completely misses the political difference as political difference (or the political difference).

In the *homo sacer* series, one can very easily find post-foundational terms like “contingency”, “undecidability”, “negativity”, and “decision”. In spite of this conceptual convergence, Agamben falls, according to Marchart and Laclau, back on the very old foundational paradigm of metaphysics. I think that the kind of post-foundational political ontology represented by Marchart and Laclau sees abstract essentialism, foundationalism, and naïve teleologism in Agamben’s understanding of the social bond. A juridico-political order, as we saw above, constitutes itself by positing and maintaining the limit relation with life. This relation, produced through the suspension of law, is “the relation of abandonment” (Agamben 1998: 60). Agamben conceives the social tie as “the form of an untying or exception in which what is captured is at the same time excluded, and in which human life is politicized only through an abandonment to an unconditional power of death” (Agamben 1998: 90). The social bond is therefore originally the non-relational relation with life. This limit relation manifests itself vividly in the exemplary figure of *homo sacer* that, as a sacred man, “*may be killed and yet not sacrificed*” (Agamben 1998: 8; original emphasis). From the perspective of the critical commentators, *homo sacer* is the extreme category that unjustly abstracts from singular and complex situations and, by doing so, subsumes under itself the very heterogeneous plurality of different phenomena from people imprisoned in a concentration camp to comatose persons (Laclau 2014: 214; Marchart 2010: 227–231). Due to the rigid opposition between bare life and sovereign power, it is not possible to analyse how inside/outside or exclusion/inclusion are articulated in concrete circumstances (Laclau 2014: 210; Marchart 2010: 232–237). This essentialist unification, Laclau thinks, ends up in a “naïve teleologism” that “draws a picture in which the becoming rule of the exception represents the unavoidable advance towards a totalitarian society” (Laclau 2014: 213). The concentration camp is the internal *telos* of history. Additionally, Agamben is not well disposed towards political post-foundationalism because it leaves us with an indeterminable situation where the moment of foundation is separated from the moment of fulfilment and where political grounding is made into “part and parcel of an infinite task” (Agamben 2005b: 104). And when one deactivates the play of difference, then one falls into an anti-foundationalism that, for Marchart, is just a peculiar type of foundationalism. All in all, Agamben’s ontologisation fails to notice the actual opportunities resulting from the breakdown of foundationalism.

Lastly, I think that one of the central topics of a post-foundational politics is the antagonistic relation. Marchart’s play between the political and politics reflects the endless re-negotiation of the social bond by conflicting articulatory practices. On Laclau’s account, however, social antagonism is downplayed when Agamben conceptualises it as the sovereign relation (Laclau 2014: 2010–213). When “a supreme will within the community is not confronted by anything” or, better, when the all-powerful sovereign is faced with the powerless

bare life, then there is no space left for social antagonisms (Laclau 2014: 212). That is to say, political conflicts can emerge only if power is not concentrated, but rather distributed unequally across the social field. In addition, Agamben's critique of sovereignty suggests that he wants to conceive a socio-political world beyond the sovereign relation. For Laclau, this is the sign of a desire for *harmonious* social relations from where political power and social antagonisms are extracted. Laclau summarises: "To be beyond any ban and any sovereignty means, simply, to be beyond politics. The myth of a *fully reconciled society* is what governs the (non-)political discourse of Agamben" (Laclau 2014: 219–220; my emphasis). Thus, within Agamben's conceptual framework, Laclau thinks it is impossible to reflect on the antagonistic fracture that divides society from within and that triggers political efforts at re-grounding the social unity. All in all, there is no politics where *all power is either completely concentrated or totally banned*.

So, in my opinion, the controversy between Agamben's political thinking and Laclau/Marchart's post-foundational political ontology revolves around three fundamental issues. Firstly, Marchart claims that Agamben fails to think the political difference as political difference, i.e., the never-ending play between the political and politics. This is the effect of an intellectualism that delimits the political difference on the side of the political. Secondly, from Laclau and Marchart's perspective, Agamben's ontologisation falls prey to an essentialist foundationalism that violently assimilates very different cases under one abstract and formalist paradigm. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, with the help of Agamben's conceptual tools, Laclau thinks that it is impossible to grasp the antagonistic divide that structures the social bond.

4. SHORT OUTLINE OF THE THREE ARTICLES

All problems raised at the end of the last subchapter are challenges that demand proper engagement. Can Agamben reflect on the political difference as political difference? Does Agamben succumb to intellectualism? Is Agamben really a foundationalist? How would Agamben approach post-foundationalism? Is it possible to reflect on social antagonisms in Agamben's conceptual framework? Does Agamben abolish social antagonism in the name of an undivided and harmonious society? Is antagonism thinkable beyond the category of relation? Anyone who is familiar with Agamben's writings notices that there is not one easy and clear answer to these questions. The *homo sacer* project has not tackled these problems directly. Agamben does not have any coherent account of the political difference between the political and politics. Nor has Agamben so far investigated the hegemonic conception of social antagonisms.

In spite of lacking a firm ground, I maintain, it is possible to find laconic and cryptic remarks scattered throughout Agamben's writings. Taking a point of departure from these hints, I seek to address the abovementioned problems. In what follows, I sum up the central thesis of all my articles: "Political Differentiability", "Giorgio Agamben's 'Messianic Fulfilment' of Foundationalism in Politics", and "Towards a Rethinking of Laclau and Mouffe's Conception of 'Social Antagonisms': Agamben's Critique of Relation".

4.1. "Political Differentiability"

The first article, entitled "Political Differentiability", is motivated by Marchart's claim that Agamben fails to think the political difference as political difference or, to use Heidegger's neologism, *Unter-Schied* (dif-ference). By focusing too much on the ontological side of the political difference, *Homo Sacer* sutures the never-ending play between the political and politics. Abstract intellectualism completely disregards the ordinary activities of politicians.

To unravel the relation between the political and politics, Marchart departs from Heidegger's ontological difference but, in particular, from Heidegger's article "Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik" that reflects on the very difference between being and beings or, as it is usually conveyed, between the ontological and the ontic. The very political difference, as Marchart suggests, shows itself in the figure of the never-ending play between the political and politics. What, for Marchart, the irresolvable chiasmus "indicates is precisely that no particular ontic politics can ever be grounded within the ontological realm of the political, but will always have to be articulated within the space opened by the play of the political difference" (Marchart 2007: 159). Politics, as one ontic realm of society, rests on the political moment of institution; and inversely, the political discloses itself in the fissures of the social. The political differencing, for example, is the moment of political articulation. In the same vein, I believe, Agamben conceives the mutual conditioning of life

and law. A juridico-political order constitutes itself in opposition to a simple fact of living. A political existence is founded on the exclusion of natural life (Agamben 1998: 7). And Agamben's train of thought can be inversed: through its suspension, a juridico-political order reveals the bare life by which it is animated. The sovereign decision differentiates life and law, outside and inside. To recapitulate, the ontological difference shows itself in the differential play between the political and politics and in the sovereign decision on the relation between life and law.

Do Marchart's endless play and Agamben's sovereign decision manage to think the difference as difference? The answer, I believe, is negative. If one aims at considering the very difference itself between the political and politics, then "the question could be raised whether we borrow the qualifier 'political' from the side of 'the political' or whether we take it from the side of 'politics'" (Agamben 2007: 173). On Marchart's account, both sides – that is, the political and politics – are equally important. In order to keep the differencing in movement, it is relevant that neither the political is hypostatized nor a 'real' politics is forgotten. From my perspective, however, it is not enough to give an equal weight to both sides of the political difference. The political difference as political difference is thought from the standpoint of its efficacy – that is to say, from the standpoint of that what the political differencing has differentiated (i.e., politics and the political). Correspondingly, life and law are given via the sovereign decision. In my opinion, Marchart's play and Agamben's sovereign decision therefore conceal the very difference itself.

Is the political difference as such still thinkable? In contrast to Marchart who wants to keep the play operative without any end, Agamben would deem it necessary to deactivate the political differencing or, what amounts to the same thing, the sovereign decision. For only in this way is it possible to grasp the very political difference itself that withdraws itself after bringing to light the constellation of the political and politics. In my opinion, the very difference that holds together the political and politics is exposed when the differencing is brought to a halt or when there are no new historical constellations of the political and politics. As a result, I think, the differential play, or the sovereign decision, reveals itself as the pure power to differentiate – or as political differentiability. Furthermore, political differentiability is the shared dimension of the political and politics or, in other words, philosophy and politics. From my point of view, the pitfalls of intellectualism and wild political practicicism can be avoided if the political difference is experienced in the dimension of political differentiability.

4.2. “Giorgio Agamben’s ‘Messianic Fulfilment’ of Foundationalism in Politics”

Metaphysical grounding of all beings reaches the point of exhaustion with the arrival of nihilism. The consumption, however, does not simply mean the end of metaphysics. The “imperfect nihilism” stays within the nullified horizon of foundationalism insofar as it recognises the absence of an ultimate foundation but, on the other hand, argues for the inevitability of foundation. Marchart’s post-foundational thought exemplifies this prevalent way of thinking. As a “perfect nihilist”, however, Agamben wants to fulfil messianically the acts of grounding (e.g., political articulation and sovereign decision) that bring into existence contingent foundations. The “messianic fulfilment” extinguishes even the Nothing or, in our case, the nullified foundationalism. From my point of view, Agamben’s philosophy can be grasped satisfactorily neither in the foundational nor in the post-foundational terms.

Marchart’s post-foundational thought, as we know, rests on the ontological presupposition that an ultimate foundation is necessarily absent. This absence, however, “does not purely and simply mean the *absence* of a ground, which would be just an absence, but is rather *the presence of an absence*. And this absence, being present, needs to be represented” (Laclau 2014: 118; original emphasis). This type of absence that occupies the intermediate place between mere absence and pure presence is named with the concept of privation. An ultimate foundation, if it exists in the state of privation, needs to be embodied and represented. The place of the ultimate foundation is filled in with a substitute – with a contingent foundation. Foundation is not thus just eliminated, but rather affirmed in its privation as a ground whose foundational character is negated (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 193). Post-foundationalism, as it is put forward by Marchart, is the empty form of foundationalism. This nullified foundationalism corresponds to the imperfect nihilism that lets “the Nothing subsist indefinitely in the form of a being in force without significance” (Agamben 1998: 53).

Through the production of contingent foundations, the political acts of grounding bring about a partial – and not full – closure of the social field. Contrary to post-foundational political thought, I think Agamben defends a messianic nihilism or, to use Nietzsche’s terminology, a “perfect nihilism” that renders inoperative the empty form of foundationalism (Agamben 1998: 53). How is this objective achieved? What post-foundationalism has not noticed in its excessive fury of grounding is the messianic potential that accompanies the very moment of foundation. The messianic involves two interlinked aspects: the moment of “retrieval” and the moment of “revocation” (Agamben 2005: 103–104; see also the next subchapter). In my opinion, the act of grounding is retrieved only when it manages to give itself back to itself – that is to say, when it succeeds in positing and maintaining a relation with itself. For this to take place, instead of bringing forth this or that contingent ground, the activity of giving grounds needs to translate into action all its own impotentiality.

According to Agamben, this actualisation of impotentiality, however, neither abolishes nor subordinates potentiality to some given actuality. Potentiality rather preserves itself in actuality as potentiality and becomes indistinguishable from it. As a practice, political articulation (like sovereign decision) exhibits its own potentiality. And finally, the initial function of a grounding act, insofar as it exhibits nothing more than its own potentiality, is revoked.

Metaphysical foundationalism survives its collapse as political acts of grounding. The activity of constructing grounds for the social entails the messianic potential. In politics metaphysics finds its *extreme* realisation; and in politics, the exhausted metaphysics can be *extinguished*. Let us take, for example, the phenomenon of dance that, for Agamben, does not necessarily belong to the realm of aesthetics. A dance when it is performed in the situation of popular protest or gathering can take the form of gesture. A political dance, as a gesture, displays the corporal movements in their mediality (Agamben 2000: 58). Gestures have a political significance because of their messianic potential. Dancing does not realise this or that potentiality. Nor does a dance aim at giving a ground for social relations and identities. Dancing rather displays nothing more than itself – that is, its pure potentiality to dance. And this retrieval, as we have seen, entails a revocation: an activity that exhibits itself in the dimension of mediality revokes its initial function. In my opinion, politics, if it is the pure realm of human gesturality, absolves us from political post-foundationalism or, in general, metaphysical grounding acts.

4.3. “Towards a Rethinking of Laclau and Mouffe’s Conception of ‘Social Antagonisms’: Agamben’s Critique of Relation”

I think it is absolutely essential to consider the concept of social antagonism if one wants to examine Laclau and Mouffe’s political thinking. Without taking into account the conception of the antagonistic relation, it is not possible to understand how the social field is generated as a hegemonic totality. From Marchart and Laclau’s perspective, Agamben fails to conceive the important role which social antagonism plays in the political institution of the social bond. I agree with Laclau that *Homo Sacer* calls into question the antagonistic relation, but from this, as I argue in this article, it does not follow that Agamben favours a reconciled society.

Trying to answer the philosophical question “What is the antagonistic relation?”, Laclau and Mouffe first exclude two widespread responses according to which social antagonism is either the contradiction between conceptual objects or “the real opposition” (*Realrepugnantz*) between real objects (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 122–123). The antagonistic relation is, simply put, “a non-relational relation” between two antagonistic poles which “are essentially heterogeneous with each other” and which call each other’s identity into question (Laclau 2014: 165). Although the antagonistic frontiers signal the

impossibility of communitarian fullness, the symbolic order is able to constitute itself as a positive reality only by positing and maintaining the relation with something heterogeneous that a discursive-hegemonic order fails to represent. This heterogeneous element, or an antagonising force, makes possible the positivity of the social. What, I think, is at stake for Laclau in the antagonistic relation is “the interplay of mutual subversion between the contingent and the necessary”, between outside and inside, negativity and positivity (Laclau 1990a: 27). There is neither pure contingency nor pure necessity, neither pure universality nor pure particularity. Identity, for instance, is mediated through the limit relation with the non-relational – i.e., with a difference that subverts identity.

Homo Sacer, I believe, concentrates mainly on the concept of relation that is explicated as “the sovereign ban”, or sovereign relation, between life and law. The ban operates in a bio-political context. At first sight, it looks as if this leads far away from Laclau and Mouffe’s ideas. In spite of enormous differences, I believe, a common ground can still be found. Specifically, Agamben’s ban is conceptualised as the limit relation: “The ban is the pure form of reference to something in general, which is to say, the simple positing of relation with the non-relational” (Agamben 1998: 29). To guarantee normal application of the law, a juridical order needs to assure its limit relation with life. Pace Hans Kelsen, law is not just a normative order (the realm of ought) purified from all socio-political facts (see Schmitt 1996: 23–40). The law, on the contrary, is subverted by life with which a juridico-political order posits and maintains a relation through the state of exception. Following Agamben, we may say that the non-relational – i.e., life – animates a juridical order. The outside penetrates the inside and subversively determines it. And like in the case of Laclau/Mouffe, the non-relational relation expresses itself in a reciprocal subversion of binary categories such as outside and inside, synchrony and diachrony. The sovereign, having the power to decide upon undecidability, guarantees the normal functioning of a juridico-political order.

What, ontologically speaking, is at stake in Agamben’s and in Laclau/Mouffe’s work is the limit form of relation understood as the sovereign relation and the antagonistic relation, respectively. Here, in my opinion, the real differences come forth. Whereas Laclau and Mouffe defend the limit relation, Agamben seeks to render the subversive interplay of dichotomies inoperative. From my perspective, Agamben’s endeavour has nothing to do with a pessimistic outlook. Contrary to Laclau’s conviction, I am convinced that it is just not enough to replace the sovereign decision with political articulation or a discursive-hegemonic order with a juridico-political order. This is so because the internal logic, on which political articulation and sovereign decision depend, has run aground with the exposure of the limit relation. The antagonistic relation, if it reveals nothing more than itself in the emptied out form, surfaces as “pure antagonism” that, for Agamben, is “the relation of abandonment”. At the limits of objectivity, practice is abandoned to the never-ending task of deciding on the undecidable and of defining the non-relational relation. In the

appearance of pure antagonism, practice experiences the entanglement within the limit relation, within the empty form that has destined political articulation and sovereign decision to bring into existence a new historical constellation of dichotomies. In this situation, I think it is not enough to hold on to the antagonistic relation and to re-define the Left-Right divide.

In conceiving the social bond beyond the sovereign ban, Agamben is seen as longing for a reconciled society (Laclau 2007: 22). For that criticism to be valid, antagonism should be understood in Laclau and Mouffe's terms of the non-relational relation. In my opinion, however, Agamben is not against social antagonisms *per se*, but rather against the limit relation. The messianic strategy does not necessarily found a harmonious society. On the contrary, political thought must take up the task of rethinking social antagonisms from the ground up. For this purpose, Agamben's concept of the "form-of-life" may offer a point of departure. The form-of-life rests neither on the separation of *zoe* from *bios* nor on the evaluation of *zoe* under the category of *bios*. In my opinion, the form-of-life is an antagonistic power that never exhausts itself in an actual order. Living at the limits of language and the symbolic order of society, it manifests as pure potentiality that demonstrates the non-coincidence of life with itself.

5. INTERCONNECTION OF THE MAIN THESES

The previous subchapter summarised the central theses of the dissertation. Till now, however, the connection between the articles has remained unclear. What is the main idea? What is the main concept of the research? What unites the political difference, post-foundationalism, and social antagonisms? An attentive reader can without any difficulty discern one clear theme that recurs in the lines of argumentation of the three articles. The central subject matter that defines Agamben's *homo sacer* project and Laclau/Marchart's post-foundational political ontology is the *passage* or *the limit zone of undecidability* between life and law, *zoe* and *bios*, *phone* and *logos*, *langue* and *parole*, exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, means and ends, exception and rule, negativity and positivity, the political and the social, a constituting power and a constituted power, a signifier and a signified, semiotics and semantics, particularity and universality, potentiality and actuality, being and beings. What, from my perspective, is at stake in all these seemingly different cases is the very passage where dichotomic opposites are brought into a subversive interplay. This type of interplay first engenders binary oppositional concepts. In Agamben's *homo sacer* project as in Laclau/Marchart's post-foundational political ontology, the passage is the undecidable zone in which dichotomic opposites are *connected* and *differentiated*. Interiority, for example, emerges as interiority through the subversive relation with an exteriority. Thus, in my opinion, there is neither for Agamben nor for Laclau/Marchart any pure negativity or pure positivity, pure particularity or pure universality, pure exclusion or pure inclusion.

The articulation of these opposites, however, runs aground at the end of metaphysics where the passage or the zone of undecidability shows itself as an impassable or ineffable thing – or even better yet, as that what has engendered all historical constellations of dichotomous opposites. In order to understand the traditional concepts of politics (for instance, constituting power and constituted power), a thoughtful involvement with metaphysics is thus indispensable. For that reason, I think, political ontology cannot simply avoid posing the question of the “modal” categories. Namely, *if one succeeds in fundamentally transforming Aristotle's traditional conception of the potentiality-actuality passage, then one has transformed the metaphysical and political tradition as a whole*. In my three articles, I argue that Agamben has accomplished precisely this objective.

The present subchapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I formulate Agamben's thinking and Laclau/Marchart's post-foundational political ontology as two responses to the collapse of metaphysics. Moreover, I argue that the limits of an order where the subversive interplay of oppositional binaries centres on the potentiality-actuality passage reveals the exhaustion of the metaphysical tradition most vividly. The second section outlines Agamben's reinterpretation of potentiality that leads to the “retrieval” and “revocation” of the potentiality-actuality passage and of the subversive interplay of opposites in general. The final section shows how the core ideas of post-foundational political ontology can be reconsidered from Agamben's perspective.

5.1. The End of Metaphysics, or the Limits of an Order

Throughout my three articles, I have sought to avoid *conflating* and *fusing* the terminologies of Agamben and post-Marxist political ontology. I have wanted to proceed by identifying as clearly as possible *the subject matter* standing at the centre of *both* approaches respectively. Having reached this shared presupposition, I believe, it is first of all possible to comprehend the nature of the break that Agamben makes with Laclau and Marchart's post-foundational conception of politics. In my opinion, both contesting approaches start from the same situation – that is to say, from the end of metaphysics as a result of *which the undecidable passage* between signifier and signified, life and law, particularity and universality, the political and politics comes to light as the *unsayable* “it” or as Heidegger's *Ereignis*. What needs to be thought as the subject matter or as the common point of departure is the “it” or, to be exact, the very ineffable passage itself from potentiality to actuality. In what follows, I put forward and defend the thesis that the culmination and exhaustion of the metaphysical tradition exposes itself at the limits of Agamben's juridico-political order and Laclau's social order. This exposure, to repeat, is the *exposure of the very undecidable passage from potentiality to actuality*.

In order to grasp what is at stake in the syntagma “the end of metaphysics”, Agamben studies and compares Heidegger's *Ereignis* and Hegel's absolute in several of his several writings (e.g., Agamben 1991; Agamben 1998: 61; Agamben 1999: 116–137; Agamben 2000: 109–112). Here, however, I do not intend to go into the similarities and differences discerned by Agamben in any detail since it would demand a long analysis. So, for the lack of the space, I confine myself to discussing Heidegger. According to Agamben's interpretation, *Ereignis* (literally, “event”, but usually translated into English as “appropriation”) is not just another “new formation of Being”, another form in being has “offered” itself in historically unique figures; for instance, being has revealed the beingness of all beings as *arche*, as subject, as substance, as god, as will, and as absolute (Heidegger 1969: 36, 66; Heidegger 2006: 72–73). After letting beings come to light and be there, being conceals itself in the present beings; or, as Heidegger says, being “withdraws” itself. The presencing of that what is present and what is given as an objective being falls into oblivion. What, however, appears in the arrival of *Ereignis* is no longer a novel epoch of being, a novel constellation of all beings in their unconcealment. Rather, on Agamben's account, *Ereignis* breaks down the onto-theo-logical chain and ends the metaphysical tradition. In the figure of *Ereignis*, thinking comes face to face with the “it” or, in German, with the impersonal pronoun “es” that has historically sent “the various forms of epochal Being”, the unconcealment of all beings (quoted from Agamben 1999: 130). Heidegger, for instance, uses expressions such as “*Es gibt Sein*” (literally, “it gives being”) and “*Es gibt Zeit*” (literally, “it gives time”). From my perspective, Agamben understands *Ereignis* as “the pure self-destining”, which has withdrawn or concealed itself in what it has sent and destined (Agamben 1999: 131). The history of metaphysics is the

history of epochs of being where being has disclosed beings and, at the same time, concealed itself in that what it brought to light. To confront *Ereignis* means to come to terms with the fact that there is *not* any unveiling of a new historical constellation of being. Metaphysics, as the history of being, ends with *Ereignis*. At the end of metaphysics, pure self-destining reveals only itself and nothing beside itself: “Tradition, which covered over what was destined in figures, now shows itself for what it is: an untransmissible transmission that transmits nothing but itself” (Agamben 1999: 133). Being has all along transmitted nothing more than its own self-concealment. *Ereignis*, insofar as it does not bring forth any new destiny or any new name for being, shows our pure abandonment to pure self-destining, to the self-concealment of being. The “it”, or *Ereignis*, appears as the *negative* – i.e., *unsayable* – limit beyond which contemporary thought has not ventured to go. What exactly is for Agamben this “pure self-destining without destiny”?

With *Ereignis*, the tradition of philosophy reaches its extreme end. The end brings to light the limits of metaphysics that, as the third chapter showed, are the limits of language. Throughout its history, the internal structure of metaphysics has had an essential relation to language. To recall Agamben’s point, metaphysics ontologically presupposes the event of language as that what transcends the said in a speech act (see the first section of the third chapter). In this sense, the onto-theo-logical figures for being are, for Agamben, the metaphysical names for language: “[W]e are the first human beings who have become *completely conscious of language*. For the first time, what preceding generations called God, Being, unconscious appear to us as what they are: *names for language*” (Agamben 1999: 45; my emphasis). However, the fact that we have become completely conscious of language does not mean that we have found a new name for language. In the same way as *Ereignis* cannot be a new epochal unveiling of being, it cannot bring about some a new epochal unconcealment of language. Following Agamben, we should say that *Ereignis* shows that there is not any name left for language: “Contemporary thought has approached an extreme limit beyond which a new epochal-religious *unveiling of the word* no longer seems possible” (Agamben 1999: 45; my emphasis). The limit which thinking has been approaching discloses that there is no name for language or, in logical terms, that there is no metalanguage (Agamben 1999: 43–47; Agamben 1999: 211–214). Language, if it is the internal structure of *Ereignis*, reveals our linguistic being, our inescapable dwelling in the medium of language. But for that reason, Agamben thinks it is impossible to signify our essential embeddedness within the movement of signification. In other words, we are abandoned to and by language as pure self-destining. In Agamben’s point of view, *Ereignis* signifies our abandonment to and by the pure self-destining of language. How is the abandonment experienced?

The breakdown of metaphysics is announced by the uncanny arrival of nihilism. Heidegger’s essay “The End of Metaphysics and the Task of Thinking” suggests defining the end not as a mere cessation, but rather as a “completion” (*Vollendung*) (Heidegger 2007: 70–71). In place of termination,

Heidegger sees metaphysics achieving a final completion through the realisation of its “extreme possibilities” in the form of nihilism. Starting eminently with the work of Nietzsche, nihilism appears as the “truth”, or “essence”, of the Occidental tradition having its beginning in Plato. In the same vein, the extreme revelation of language as pure self-destining is, for Agamben, the coming of nihilism that

”interprets the extreme revelation of language in the sense that there is nothing to reveal, that the truth of language is that it unveils the Nothing of all things. The absence of a metalanguage thus appears as *the negative form of the presupposition, and the Nothing as the final veil, the final name of language*” (Agamben 1999: 46; my emphasis).

So, on Agamben’s account, the extreme revelation of language, with which metaphysics ends, is experienced as unveiling the nothingness of all beings. If there is no metalanguage, no new epochal name for the name, then being as language is taken as an ontological form of presupposition that is implicitly transmitted but all the time not said in every speech act. The Nothing is, in other words, the unsayable presupposition of all presuppositions. Paradoxically, however, this turns the Nothing into a final name for language (Agamben 1999: 46). The nihilistic completion of metaphysics has, in my view, a double face: the face of *culmination* and *exhaustion*.¹⁸ Nihilism reveals the breakdown of metaphysics, that is, our thrownness into an infinite self-destining of language without destiny. Nihilism exhausts all possible figures for language. Yet, at the same time, by making the Nothing into a negative form of presupposition, nihilism pushes the metaphysical tradition to the extreme: the beingness of beings is unveiled as the Nothing. *Thus, having reached the state of completion, metaphysics culminates and, by doing so, exhausts itself in nihilism.* The “it”, or *Ereignis*, reveals itself as the Nothing, as an unsayable presupposition.

So far, we have been reading the end of metaphysics as the culmination and exhaustion of the onto-theo-logical chain or, as Agamben would say, of language in nihilism. The extreme revelation of language reveals the self-concealment of language as the pure self-destining to which we are abandoned without any possibility of escape. This claim needs to be unpacked and exemplified further. For this purpose, I think it is helpful to turn to Derrida’s deconstructive strategy of reading that demonstrates the impossibility of a fundamental structure (i.e., the sign) to be present as a sutured totality, as one object among other beings (Derrida 1973; Agamben 1993c; Agamben 2005b: 102–103). When the movement of signification, insofar as it is signifies, is ungraspable, then language represents itself as a hollowed out form, as a pure form without any corresponding substance. In Agamben’s opinion,

¹⁸ Similarly, for Heidegger, metaphysics culminates in the actualisation of “its extreme possibilities” in the development of modern science; but metaphysics also exhausts itself in the nihilistic approach of sciences that do not ask after their “ontological” presuppositions (Heidegger 2007: 70–73).

deconstruction conceives language at the state of its breakdown. Although the meaningful self-reference of language is impossible, Derrida still continues to uphold the function of self-signification (Agamben 2005b: 103). Pure self-destining is the infinite self-signification without any fulfilment: “A signification that only signifies itself can never seize hold of itself, it can never catch up with a void in representation, nor does it ever allow anything to be an insignificant; rather, it is displaced and deferred in one and the same gesture” (Agamben 2005b: 103). Here, I believe, we encounter again the double structure of nihilism: signification is exhausted and yet kept running on empty. Because of the void in signification, because of the lack of the name for language, signification is in a state of excess or “overabundance” insofar as it operates by producing “supplements” for the structural lack, that is, supplements that never manage to come to terms with the impossibility. Supplements render the name for language present in its absence (Derrida 2007: 365–366).

Laying out Agamben’s position, I have argued that the breakdown of the onto-theo-logical chain of “transcendental” names for being or for language does not mean the simple cessation and termination of metaphysics as a relic of some past folly; respectively, the uncanny interruption of signification does not imply a meaningless silence, a complete stoppage of signification. Nihilism, contrary to what might be expected, is not a mere absence of meaning. In the domination of nihilism, the human being rather finds itself abandoned by and to metaphysics or, to be exact, to language (Derrida 2007: 354–355; Agamben 1999: 45–46). The nature of this human condition can be explicated further. Namely, a zero-degree signification manifests itself in the breakdown of the signified-signifier isomorphism, or the natural harmony of the sign (e.g., Laclau 1996: 36–40). What, according to Agamben, shows itself as a result is the very passage or the very relation which connects the opposite poles of the sign (Agamben 1993c: 152–157). The barrier signals a negative presence of meaning or, put differently, of language. Furthermore, the barrier, or passage, is the place of “*undecidability*” where human practice articulates the passages through a signifier and a signified, beings and being, semiotics and semantics, *phone* and *logos*, *langue* and *parole*. This articulatory practice sets signification into movement by connecting and differentiating *logos* and *phone*, beings and being. So, in my opinion, Agamben understands pure self-destining (or the “it” or, in German, the “es”) as an articulatory practice that determines the very relation between signifier and signified, etc. To reformulate once more, *the end of metaphysics reveals the undecidable passages where human practice first finds itself abandoned to articulating the dichotomous opposites. Ereignis*, as the extreme revelation of language as self-destining without a final fulfilment, is the undecidable passage where articulatory practice brings binary concepts into a subversive interplay.

Derrida’s concept of undecidability (along with the corresponding metonymies such as “freedom”, “contingency”, and “decision”) is present in Laclau/Mouffe’s approach and, subsequently, in Marchart’s political ontology (e.g., Laclau 1985: xi, 105–116; Marchart 2007: 2–3). Again, like in Agamben,

the term signals the end of metaphysics that is described by Laclau with the following words:

“The metaphysical discourse of the West is coming to an end, and philosophy in its twilight has performed, through the great names of the century, a last service for us: the deconstruction of its own terrain and the creation of the conditions for its own *impossibility*. Once *undecidability* has reached the *ground* itself [...] the realm of philosophy comes to an end and the realm of politics begins” (Laclau 1996: 123; my emphasis).

Here, metaphysics is the discourse of all discourses that, in its twilight, deconstructs its guiding aspiration of unveiling the ultimate principles of the world. Deconstruction, according to Laclau, performs us a last service by showing the impossibility of a general and universal ontology, the impossibility of a self-grounding and self-evident foundation. Contrary to what the Occidental tradition has thought, there is no immediate access either to pure being or, similarly, to social reality. The access is rather always *mediated* by particular discourses and contexts and points of view. Again, like in the case of Agamben, language, to which and by which we are abandoned, is not representable as a present being, as a full objectivity. From Laclau and Mouffe’s point of view, all beings as beings (including social being) are constituted in a non-sutured discursive field (Laclau 1990a: 97–114). What is visible at the end of metaphysics is the fact that it is impossible to grasp society as a sutured objectivity grounded on an ultimate foundation. Yet, the impossibility does *not* mean a mere absence of society. For Laclau, I think, *Ereignis* manifests itself as the empty form of an order, as the empty form of relation between a signifier and a signified. An order that has exhausted all its historical figures reveals itself as “absent communitarian fullness”. Later, however, Marchart draws the consequences of Laclau’s theoretical premises in full: metaphysics does not just cease to exist with the emergence of politics; politics rather preserves the impossible discourse of metaphysics by rendering it present in its absence (Marchart 2007: 163–169; see also the third section of the second chapter). Metaphysics, although it has exhausted its figures as an ultimate science with pure being as foundation, is still upheld and experienced as the empty form of a general ontology. The impossibility, which deconstruction is at pains to point out in reading the fundamental texts of the Occident, signifies nothing more than the “it” or the negative presence of metaphysics (Derrida 2007: 354). So, contrary to Laclau’s opinion, the age of politics does not simply do away with first philosophy.

Metaphysics, to recapitulate, ends with the extreme revelation of language that corresponds to the collapse of the onto-theo-logical names for being (or for language) or, what amounts to the same thing, to the breakdown of the signifier-signified relation. Pure self-destining is language that, throughout the history of metaphysics, has concealed itself in the historical constellations of a signifier and a signified, beings and being, semiotics and semantics, *phone* and *logos*, *langue* and *parole*. Having exhausted its figures, the self-destining, as I have

argued, reveals the undecidable passage where being and beings, signifier and signified, are connected and differentiated. Next, I argue that this subversive passage of dichotomous opposites is vividly visible in Agamben's juridico-political order, Laclau's discursive-hegemonic order, and Marchart's conception of metaphysics. *The culmination and exhaustion of metaphysics manifests itself at the limits of a social and juridico-political order that is the place of an exemplary passage from potentiality to actuality.* In what follows, I show in what way the potentiality-actuality passages come to light at the limits of a juridico-political order and a discursive-hegemonic order. I discuss Agamben and Laclau/Marchart's approaches in separate subsections.

5.1.1. Agamben's Juridico-Political Order

The end of metaphysics, as we have seen, reveals the "it" or the undecidable passage of dichotomous binaries. For Agamben, I believe, the potentiality-actuality relation is the fundamental one among the metaphysical oppositions. In what follows, I want to show where the potentiality-actuality passage takes place in a juridico-political order.

In *Homo Sacer*, the metaphysical categories are explicitly linked with juridico-political concepts (see, for example, Agamben 1998: 39–48, 60–62, 182). The structural analogy between the metaphysical categories and the juridico-political notions of the Occident comes brilliantly forth in the following quotation:

"[P]otentiality and actuality are simply *two faces of the sovereign self-grounding of Being*. *Sovereignty* is always double because *Being*, as potentiality, suspends itself, maintaining itself in a relation of ban (or abandonment) with itself in order to realize itself as absolute actuality (which thus presupposes nothing other than its own potentiality)" (Agamben 1998: 47; my emphasis).

Here, as we can read, potentiality and actuality are not just any "modal" categories analysable purely from the point of view of logic. In my opinion, Agamben rather understands potentiality and actuality as *two primary modes of being*. Not only actuality, but also potentiality has an independent mode of being (see next section of the current chapter). But how does the being of potentiality show itself? For Agamben, being, as long as it is potentiality, has to be able to suspend itself and to exist in the mode of privation. In order to disclose itself, potentiality needs to be capable of its own impotentiality. *Being, as potentiality, presents itself in the state of suspension. Ereignis*, which signifies the breakdown of the onto-theo-logical chain, demonstrates the potentiality of being to maintain itself in the state of impotentiality. From my perspective, *Ereignis*, as the extreme revelation of language, is simply the nullified figure of being, the negative presence of being (language). In other words, *Ereignis* marks the extreme limit where being exists in the state of its suspension. Impotentiality makes visible *the passage* from potentiality to actuality. But, as

we can read from the above quotation, being can sovereignly decide to translate its potentiality into actuality. Moreover, Agamben combines the self-grounding of being with that of the sovereign. The end of metaphysics expresses itself vividly at the limits of an order where the sovereign (the fundamental concept of the juridico-political tradition) and being (the fundamental concept of metaphysics) pass over into each other (e.g., Agamben 1998: 182). *At the end of metaphysics, the potentiality-actuality passage comes to light exemplarily at the limits of a juridico-political order.* What thus needs to be thought is an order that enforces itself in the nullified state, in the state of suspension. The limits of an order, in my opinion, bring forth the potentiality-actuality passage that exemplarily coincides with the exhaustion and culmination of metaphysics in *Ereignis*. In what follows, I will substantiate this claim.

Agamben is interested in the limits of the social bond or of a juridico-political order (e.g., Agamben 1998: 15; Agamben 2005b: 104–106). These limits, as we know, appear in the state of exception where the normal functioning of an order is suspended. This suspension does not bring about a disorderly chaos. In the state of exception, an order continues to enforce itself in an emptied out form: “*The rule applies to the exception in no longer applying, in withdrawing from it.*” The state of exception is thus not the chaos that precedes order but rather the situation that results from its suspension” (Agamben 1998: 18; original emphasis). What enforces itself in the state of exception is the empty form of the Law. As such, a juridico-political order is able to manifest itself in a nullified form. From Agamben’s point of view, a juridico-political order is present in its absence. The case in point for Agamben is Kafka’s parable “Before the Law” that tells a story of a man from the country seeking access to the Law. This man, however, is unable to pass through the door of the Law despite it being wide open. Agamben comments on the story thus: “Kafka’s legend presents the pure form in which law affirms itself with the greatest force precisely at the point in which it *no longer prescribes anything* [...]” (Agamben 1998: 49; my emphasis). In the state of exception, the Law enforces itself in the hollowed out form.

Potentiality does not demonstrate its independent being in the actual functioning of an order, in the actuality of some meaningful proposition, or in the full actuality of being. On the contrary, the being of potentiality expresses itself at the extreme limits where a juridico-political order demonstrates nothing less than its own potentiality to suspend itself and to maintain itself in the state of impotentiality. Using again Kafka’s parable again, Agamben explains: “The man from the country is delivered over to the *potentiality* of law because law demands nothing of him and commands nothing other than its own openness” (Agamben 1998: 50; my emphasis). To use a juridical vocabulary, it is correct to say that the being of potentiality manifests itself in the state of exception where a juridico-political order shows its constitutive potentiality “to maintain itself in its own privation, to apply in no longer applying” (Agamben 1998: 28). Employing its own impotentiality, an order can maintain itself in the state of privation, in the emptied out form that interrupts its historical unveilings. For

Agamben, I think, the nullified order is analogous to the “it” or *Ereignis* which, as we know, marks the end of metaphysics.

An order, existing in the state of suspension, reveals the *passage* from potentiality to actuality. This passage, as we know, is the zone of undecidability that, according to Agamben, is occupied by the sovereign power (Agamben 1998: 26–27; Agamben 2000: 113). In the last instance, it is up to the sovereign to decide when and where to suspend an order and when and where to translate its power into actuality. That is to say, the sovereign secures the passage from the empty form of an order to a concrete order. What, in my opinion, is at stake in the passage is the very relation itself between a constituting power and a constituted power (see Agamben 1998: 43–44). This means that there is neither fully fixed order nor purely potential order. True, with the help of impotentiality, the sovereign can exist in the state of suspension: “[S]overeign power can also, as such, maintain itself infinitely, without ever passing over into actuality” (Agamben 1998: 47). Yet, there is always a troublemaker who can provoke the sovereign to translate its power into actuality. *The sovereign, insofar as it secures the potentiality-actuality passage, secures the subversive interplay of binary concepts.* What is at stake in the culmination and exhaustion of the metaphysical and political tradition is the undecidable zone where the sovereign decides upon the very potentiality-actuality passage. This passage is the “it” or self-destining that, throughout the metaphysical and juridico-political tradition, has remained concealed. However, the culmination and exhaustion of metaphysics in *Ereignis* brings this undecidable passage forth as the ineffable limit.

5.1.2. Laclau’s Discursive-Hegemonic Order

Anyone who has read *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* knows that neither potentiality nor actuality is of primary importance in Laclau and Mouffe’s terminology. Nor does the concept of potentiality appear explicitly in Marchart’s work. Nevertheless, I maintain, the potentiality-actuality relation underlies their post-Marxist approach. In what follows, I seek to demonstrate this claim with Laclau’s discursive-hegemonic order and Marchart’s political post-foundationalism.

According to Laclau, it is not possible to denote a society with an empirical referent. Society, like pure being, is not an ontic being that can be encountered somewhere as a fully present positivity. To put the same thing differently, there is no any ultimate foundation on the basis of which to conceive society as a fully transparent and present object (Laclau 1990a: 89–92). The social field, as a field of differences, is not an enclosed objectivity:

“Against this essentialist vision we tend nowadays to accept the *infinitude of the social*, that is, the fact that any structural system is limited, that it is always surrounded by an ‘excess of meaning’ which it is unable to master and that,

consequently, ‘society’ as a unitary and intelligible object which grounds its own partial processes is an impossible object” (Laclau 1990a: 90; original emphasis).

So, according to Laclau, society is impossible as long as it lacks a rigidly determined identity or literal meaning defined by some objectivity (e.g., economic law). If, furthermore, society is a signifying structure like many others, then the discursive field of the social is ineffable as a transparent totality. Yet, on Laclau’s account, it is possible to conceive society at the limits of social objectivity where the impossible object attains a negative form of presence. As such, a social order is able to appear, for Laclau, at the point of its breakdown: “‘Order’ as such has no content, because it only exists in the various forms in which it is *actually realized*, but in a situation of radical disorder ‘order’ is *present* as that which is *absent*; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of that absence” (Laclau 1996: 44; my emphasis). As such, a social order represents itself as a result of the breakdown of a social bond. In the same way as Agamben’s juridico-political order enforces itself at its limits as the empty form, *Laclau’s communitarian fullness is present in its absence at the limits of social positivity.*

The nullified order, I believe, manifests nothing more than itself at the level of the being of potentiality. Following Agamben, I would claim that *an order is able to point to itself only because of its constitutive potentiality to maintain itself in the state of privation.* By virtue of impotentiality, the being of an order is grasped in the state of its suspension. An order displays itself as lacking any fixed content; that is to say, society, or communitarian fullness, is present in its absence, in its privation. Or, in other words, social dislocations produce empty signifiers that can be attached to any signified. Empty signifiers, produced by the social, represent absent communitarian fullness that can be filled in with many possible contents:

“This can only mean that the general form of fullness is exactly equivalent to the general form of possibility. That is to say that the fullness of the social does not manifest itself in any concrete social order but in the possibility of representing its radical *indeterminacy*, in other words its nature as a mere *possibility*” (Laclau 1990a: 79; my emphasis).

So, for Laclau, a dislocated order is undecidable with regard to its content. The empty form, or being, of an order is equivalent to the plurality of possibilities of how social relations can be (re-)organised. The emptiness and fullness are two sides of the same coin (see Laclau 2005: 170). Take, for instance, the concept of *mana* that, lacking a determinate meaning, is able to acquire a wide range of actual meanings depending on the context (Laclau 1996: 36; Agamben 2005b: 101–102; Derrida 2007: 366–367). The empty signifier, representing a nullified order or society, is the zone of undecidability where the signified-signifier passage is decided upon or, better, where it is decided which discursive-hegemonic substitute shall fill in the empty form of an order. In what follows, I substantiate this claim with Laclau’s concept of “dislocation”.

Laclau discusses the concept of dislocation in the essay “New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time” (Laclau 1990a: 41–45). The moments of dislocation are, shortly put, interruptive events that disclose a structural impossibility due to which a structure fails to constitute itself as a sutured totality, as a fully transparent object. A signifying structure, like society, is constitutively unable to coincide with itself as a full objectivity. The dislocation lays bare the internal limits around which a hegemonic order constitutes itself as a signifying structure. The sites of social antagonism are the exemplary spaces of dislocation. Laclau identifies three dimensions of dislocation. The first moment is temporality that is opposed to the spatiality, or symbolic repetition, of a structural rule (Laclau 1990a: 41–42). A symbolic representation hegemonises time. Temporality, heterogeneous with respect to symbolic repetition, is “a pure effect of dislocation” (Laclau 1990a: 42). The second dimension is freedom that, for Laclau, is located between two extremes: a full self-determination of the subject (e.g., existentialism) and a total absorption of the subject’s identity by the objectivity of a structure (Laclau 1990a: 43–45). There is a space for freedom only because a social structure is never able to fully determine the identity of a subject.

In addition to temporality and freedom, possibility is the third and final dimension of dislocation. Illuminating this claim, Laclau first turns to Aristotle who, in *Metaphysics*, examines possibility in relation to movement (*kinesis*). What, for Laclau, is conceivable in motion is “the actuality of the possible as possible” (Laclau 1990a: 42). To borrow Laclau’s example, let us imagine an entity whose colour changes from white to black. Through this change, the entity actualises its potential. During the process of movement when the white entity turns black or during the process of blackening, the possible is actual as possible. In any case, this kind of movement presupposes a predetermined *telos*: “The Aristotelian possibility, however, is a single possibility because the process of change is conceived as *development* and thus appears dominated by the *telos* of the transition from potentiality to actuality” (Laclau 1990a: 42; original emphasis).

A dislocated structure, in contrast, does not reveal a single possibility, but rather a *plurality* of possibilities:

“This means that there must be other possibilities, since the idea of a single possibility denies what is involved in the very concept of possibility. As we have seen, because structural dislocation is constitutive, the dislocated structure cannot provide the principle of its transformations. The dislocated structure thus opens possibilities of multiple and indeterminate rearticulations for those freed from its coercive force and who are consequently outside of it” (Laclau 1990a: 42–43).

Conceptually, for Laclau, a radical possibility involves the presence of alternative possibilities. The event of dislocation opens a *plurality of possibilities* regarding how social identities and relations can be rearticulated into a signifying totality, into a discursive-hegemonic order. The possibilities repre-

sent thus the alternative conceptions of an order. A dislocated structure does not predetermine in what way social elements are rearticulated into a new order. The passage from possibility to actuality is not fixed by a pregiven *telos*. What, in Laclau's opinion, is realised and what is repressed is not predetermined by some positivity (for example, economic or moral laws). In this sense, political articulation or, better, the political acts of institution take place in a zone of undecidability. The undecidability on which political articulation decides is therefore a zone of possibilities. A dislocated structure opens thus the undecidable zone of the possible where political articulation decides upon the passage between potentiality and actuality, between being and beings, an order and a particular ordering, between the political and the social. Even though political articulation is not structurally determined, it is not completely undetermined either – that is, the undecidable is not absolute: “[A] widening of the field of the possible [...] takes place in a determined situation: that is, one in which there is always a relative structuration” (Laclau 1990a: 43). The possibilities, opened through dislocation, are therefore not logical possibilities, but rather a conceivable or *real* alternative to a prevailing order.

A possible order that is actualised through political articulation excludes all real alternative possibilities, all competing representations of the social as a totality. A discursive-hegemonic order, in spite of its imaginary aspirations, is unable to realise communitarian fullness (Laclau 1990a: 44). There is a constitutive gap that separates the representative and the represented, communitarian fullness and a discursive-hegemonic order or, to use Heidegger's terminology, being and beings. The instituting acts remain ontologically incomplete – that is to say, political articulations are unable to bring into existence the idea of communitarian fullness. Despite the realisation of a concrete order, political articulations fail to realise a sutured totality, a reconciled society. An actual order, no matter what its form, is able to erase and exhaust the possible. The excess, in the form of the possible, haunts the positivity of the social and, in the final instance, imposes itself on it (Laclau 1990a: 43). This possible appears through a “reactivation” of social “sedimentations” that, at first sight, appear to be natural and necessary. What, according to Laclau, the reactivation brings forth is contingency, or undecidability, of a social formation that is covered under the sedimentations of the social (Laclau 1990a: 33–35). The zone of undecidability is the site where the passage through being and beings, the empty form of an order and an ontic order is articulated politically. In the condition where an order maintains itself in the state of suspension, political articulation determines sovereignly what type of an ontic order is actualised. From my perspective, the end of metaphysics brings to light this undecidable passage. To sum up: *the limit where an order is present in the state of suspension is the passage where potentiality (absent communitarian fullness, a nullified order) can pass over into actuality (a concrete form of order)*. This transition takes place through articulatory practice that organises the non-fixed fragments of the social into a signifying totality.

Similarly to Laclau, Marchart does not directly examine the problem of potentiality. Yet, like in Laclau's thinking, the concept is nevertheless implicitly presupposed. Consider, for instance, the following statement: "[T]he political (located, as it were, on the 'ontological' side of Being-as-ground) will never be able to fully live up to its function as Ground – and yet it has to be actualized in the form of an always concrete *politics* that necessarily fails to deliver what it has promised" (Marchart 2007: 8). The moment of the political is always in excess of the moment of its actualisation. The acts of grounding never reach a final fulfilment: the possible exceeds the actual. That is to say, there is only the passage of articulation (or political grounding act) between the moment of the political and the moment of its actualisation. Marchart develops this type of post-foundational political ontology in response to the crisis of the metaphysical tradition that experiences the absence of an ultimate foundation. This absence, however, does not end up in an anti-foundationalism that does away with the concept of foundation altogether. Laclau summarises Marchart's idea succinctly:

“‘Anti-foundationalism’ would be the pure and simple absence of a ground, which could only be expressed through a proliferation of ontic identities. ‘Post-foundationalism’ means something different: the ground does not disappear, but is penetrated by a dimension of absence or contingency that renders impossible any reduction of the ontological to the ontic” (Laclau 2014: 119).

The absence of an ultimate foundation discloses the ontological dimension that maintains foundation present in its absence. I think that the same idea can be reformulated with the concept of potentiality. To attest to the phenomenon of foundation means to attest to the being of potentiality due to which foundation can maintain itself in the state of privation. Being-as-foundation shows itself as the empty from that requires an ontic representation. Contingent foundations represent the ultimate foundation in its absence. There is only a passage through the ontic and ontological as long as no foundation fully assumes the status of an ultimate foundation. Political practice (e.g., political articulation and the acts of political grounding) does not close, but rather conveys the passage.

In essence, the previous line of argumentation redescribes the status of metaphysics. Having reached its end, metaphysics is not simply absent, but rather present as the “it”, *Ereignis*, the ineffable barrier between a signifier and signified. The fundamental science, concerned with the ultimate foundation of the world, becomes present in its absence. This empty form of metaphysics can be filled in by a plurality of ontic supplements or regional disciplines. What, according to Marchart, determines the exact from of metaphysics or what an ontic supplement fills in the structural lack of pure being is a political decision:

“[A]scension of a regional ontology to the always precarious status of a general ontology can be only based, at the end of the day, on a contingent decision. And our decision to grant *political* thought (rather than aesthetics, or ethics, or set theory) the role of a *prima philosophia* is, of course, not so much a ‘philo-

sophical' decision based, for instance, on so-called rational grounds, as it is an intrinsically *political decision*: an intervention from the ontic side of politics into the depoliticized field of philosophy" (Marchart 2007: 171; original emphasis).

In the same way as absent communitarian fullness is realised through a hegemonic substitute, the content of metaphysics is determined by political decision. For Marchart, a decision to elevate political ontology to the status of a first philosophy is a *political* decision. That is to say, political decision actualises the impossible discipline of metaphysics by subverting pure being with an ontic content. Marchart's political decision, I believe, occupies the undecidable passage where it fixes for the time being the subversive interplay between universality and particularity, the political and politics.

5.2. Agamben's Conception of the Potentiality-Actuality Passage

Agamben formulates in the introduction to *Infancy and History* the main problem of his work: "[W]hat is the meaning of 'there is language'; what is the meaning of 'I speak'?" (Agamben 1993b: 5). These questions are a little later specified as "What is the meaning of 'I can'?" If one understands the meaning of "I can", it is much easier to grasp the idea behind Agamben's concepts such as messianism, language, sovereignty, and law. In my opinion, however, this question can be made even more specific – namely, "I can" might be condensed into the question of the very passage where a learned capability, or a potentiality to do or be, is set into action. What is therefore at stake in "I speak" or "I can" is the translation of potentiality into actuality. In what follows, I will to show how Agamben explicates and interprets this very passage by rethinking Aristotle's concept of potentiality.

What is at issue in Agamben's studies is a learned capability, a capacity, or a potentiality to do or be (*dynamis*) that exists in a complicated relationship with actuality (*energeia*). These "modal" categories, as it is well-known, are discussed by Aristotle in the Book Theta of *Metaphysics* (Aristotle 2006). Before setting forth his own position, Aristotle introduces the views of the Megarians: "There are some – such as the Megarians – who say that something is capable only when it is acting, and when it is not acting it is not capable" (Aristotle 2006: 1046b, 29–31). What is thus potential can exist if and only if it is exercised. The ability to play the kithara, for example, manifests itself in the actual performance. If one can play a kithara, then this learned ability exists only in the act of playing. And if no playing takes place, then there is no potentiality. Potentiality does not have a separate existence besides its being realised in act. All rational capacities, or crafts, are subordinated to the presence of acting. From the Megarian perspective, potentiality does not thus have an independent being.

To counter the Megarians' interpretation, we need to examine the problem more closely. What, from Agamben's point of view, is above all at stake in the complex relation between the "modal" categories is the very ineffable *passage* or movement from potentiality to actuality, from a capability into an act. In Aristotle's ethical theory of virtues, this transition takes place through the "habit" (*hexis*) that, generally speaking, puts into action a knowledge, a technique or a faculty (Agamben 2013a: 92–94). A "virtue" (*arete*) is the acquired habit to exercise a potential in accordance with the good. *The habit defines the passage from the knowledge of the good to its realisation in act*. Paradoxically, however, *hexis* is also the habit of *privation* (*steresis*). To have a potential to do or be implies to have a power *not* to be or do (Agamben 1998: 45). The ability to play the kithara does not always have to be put into action. The attained skill does not have to be exercised. And furthermore, when the acquired ability, knowledge, or skill is not exercised, it is not thereby abolished and made inexistent. Every type of potentiality entails a constitutive "impotentiality" (*adynamia*); in other words, *impotentiality* is the "essence" of potentiality. Aristotle states this point bluntly: "Every potentiality is impotentiality of the same and with respect to the same (*tou autou kai kata to auto pasa dynamis adynamiai*) (*Metaphysics*, 1046a, 32)"¹⁹ (Agamben 1998: 45). By virtue of its own impotentiality, a potentiality or capability is never dissolved and exhausted in the actuality of an act. What, in the end, constitutes the humanity of a human being is not this or that capacity or knowledge or skill, but rather the capacity to maintain oneself in relation to one's own privation, to one's own impotentiality.

What, today, has fallen into oblivion is precisely impotentiality or, rather, the potentiality not to do and be. Take, for instance, the question of emancipation. The Marxist perspective associates the alienation of the working class with the capitalist mode of production due to which the full realisation of human capacities is significantly constrained. Hindering the free development of human faculties, capitalism produces an impoverished mass – that is, the proletariat – who, in order to stay alive, have to sell their labour power to the capitalist. In contrast to this Marxist approach, the late capitalism promotes, according to Agamben, the feeling "Nothing is impossible":

"Separated from his impotentiality, deprived of the experience of what he can not do, today's man believes himself capable of everything, and so he repeats his jovial "no problem," and his irresponsible "I can do it," precisely when he should instead realize that he has been consigned in unheard of measure to forces and processes over which he has lost all control" (Agamben 2011: 44).

The market-oriented powers have changed the underlying characteristics of socio-political domination. In our time, as Agamben argues, human beings are not so much separated from what they can do or be, but rather from what they

¹⁹ Compare with an alternative translation: "And incapacity and being incapable are the privation that is opposite to the capacity of this sort, so that every capacity and incapacity are for the same thing and in the same respect" (Aristotle 2006: 1046a: 29–31).

cannot do or be. Human beings are not so much separated from their powers as deprived from the experience of privation. Today's man "has become blind not to his capacities but to his incapacities, not to what he can do but to what it cannot, or can not, do" (Agamben 2011: 44). In this changed socio-economic situation, resistance becomes a far more complicated and challenging affair: "Those who are separated from what they can do, can, however, still resist; they can still not do. Those who are separated from their own impotentiality lose, on the other hand, first of all the capacity to resist" (Agamben 2011: 45). To maintain the capacity to resist in the current world, it is thus necessary to start reappropriating impotentiality that constitutes every type of human capacity.

What the capitalist world of spectacle wants to hide away from us at all cost is the very passage between potentiality and actuality, a capacity and its exercise, power and act. Through impotentiality, this very passage comes to light as an ineffable thing. In the previous stages of our research, we have already encountered this same passage as the extreme limit of Laclau's discursive-hegemonic order and of Agamben's juridico-political order. An order is an order only on the condition that it can exist beyond its normal application as the nullified form. In more general terms: the passage was already present in the breakdown of the onto-theo-logical chain in Heidegger's figure of *Ereignis* or, alternatively, in the extreme revelation of language that illustrates the sovereign capacity of being to maintain itself in the state of suspension (Agamben 1998: 21). In the last instance, I think, the potentiality-actuality relation is an exemplary passage as long as it overlaps and gathers around itself all other possible oppositions. When, for instance, we face a juridico-political order in the state of impotentiality (or, in the state of exception), we have to deal with nothing less than the undecidable passage between life and law, outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion, being and beings. In the same vein: when we are face to face with a discursive-hegemonic order in the state of its own suspension, then we have to confront the undecidable passage between particularity and universality, outside and inside, signifier and signified, the political and the social, negativity and positivity, contingency and necessity. Thus, to recapitulate, Aristotle's "modal" categories come before all others. So, from my perspective, the relation between actuality and potentiality has a *paradigmatic* importance for the delineation and "overcoming" of the metaphysical and political tradition in their entirety.

To possess a learned capacity or knowledge means to put it in action. The skill of painting, for instance, becomes visible in an actual painting. At first sight, it seems as if an actualisation of potentiality requires a setting aside of impotentiality. By presenting a musical piece, for example, a player annuls his/her own ability not to exercise his/her acquired capacity. This is at least one prevailing way to conceive the movement from potentiality to actuality, from power to act. Despite its deceptive obviousness, one could nevertheless pose seemingly innocent questions: *Is it possible to conceive the actuality of impotentiality? Is it possible to realise impotentiality?* Trying to answer these problems, Agamben cites a problematic sentence from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*:

“A thing is said to be potential if, when the act of which it is said to be potential is realized, there will be nothing im-potential (that is, there will be nothing able not to be) (*Metaphysics*, 1047a, 24–26)” (Agamben 1998: 45). This translation, as well as Agamben’s interpretation, is at odds with the traditional understanding.²⁰ In contrast to the prevailing interpretations, Agamben suggests that an act does not necessarily have to destroy its own impotentiality: “To set impotentiality aside is not to destroy it but, on the contrary, to fulfil it, to turn potentiality back upon itself in order to give itself to itself” (Agamben 1998: 46). Only by virtue of being able to realise all impotentiality, i.e., of being able to bring all impotentiality into an act, is potentiality able to seize hold of itself as potentiality. Through this kind of fulfilment, potentiality manages to refer to itself – that is to say, potentiality gives itself to itself as potentiality. *Enabling its own impotentiality, an action can truly exhibit its own potentiality of acting and being*. Glenn Gould is, for Agamben, an exemplary pianist who, in the intense act of playing, does not just exercise “his potential to play [...], but rather his potential to not-play” (Agamben 1993a: 36). *Adynamia* is in this way fully actualised and brought into action. *The inactivity, internal to any generic form of capacity, is enacted fully*. For this reason, the impotentiality with which Gould performs a musical piece cannot just be identified with bare idleness. What, according to Agamben, an action needs to be enacted out is its own impotentiality, its own inactivity, or its own impotentiality not to be and do.

Playing a piece of music, a professional musician realises a potential learned through hard training. But it is harder to conceive what it means for the same musician to actualise his or her own impotentiality to play, what it means to act out all the potentiality not to be or do. One thing is nevertheless certain: neither this nor that being is experienced when potentiality exposes itself as such through the realisation of all impotentiality. What, for example, we perceive after closing our eyes, after suspending our power to see something is not a mere absence or nothingness, but rather a pure receptivity, a pure potentiality to perceive (Agamben 1999: 181). In the perception of the darkness that appears after closing one’s eyes, a human being is confronted by its own impotentiality that displays the potentiality to perceive. In the same manner, when an action or practice enacts its own potentiality not to do or be, then an action does not simply negate, but rather fully realises impotentiality. By actualising its own impotentiality, the action is able to turn back upon itself and to exhibit itself in the medium of pure potentiality. To take a case in point, let us read the following quotation from Agamben’s book *State of Exception*: “To a word that does not bind, that neither commands nor prohibits anything, but says only

²⁰ Stephen Makin translates the previous citation thus: “And this is what is possible – that for which, if the actuality of which it is said to have the capacity obtains, there will be nothing impossible” (Aristotle 2006: 1047a, 24–26). According to Makin, Aristotle states in these lines a modal test for possibility: “[...] if p is in fact the case then clearly nothing impossible follows from p’s actually being the case” (Makin 2006: 72). However, this modal test for possibility is not applicable to non-standard modalities such as capacities and crafts (Makin 2006: 74).

itself, would correspond an action as pure means, which shows only itself, without any relation to an end” (Agamben 2005a: 88). This type of political action is not exhausted in some precalculated end. Absolved from its natural end, an action shows only itself in the dimension of pure potentiality. This self-exposure means thus nothing other than the exhibition of an action in the dimension of pure potentiality. Instead of realising some sort of function or objective, an action manages to display itself in the dimension of its own potentiality.

In opposition to the ordinary realisation of a capability or craft, the fulfilment of impotentiality brings into existence neither an end product nor an ethical good as an end in itself. By using up all impotentiality, an action is able to demonstrate its own inexhaustible power to do or be. In contrast to *poiesis* and *praxis*, potentiality is favoured by Agamben neither as a means to an end nor as an end in itself (e.g., Agamben 2000: 57–58). Through the full realisation of impotentiality, an act turns potentiality back upon itself; and by doing so, an act reveals itself in the dimension of potentiality. The fulfilled impotentiality is therefore pure potentiality, i.e., the self-exposure of potentiality: “[P]ure potentiality, that is, the actuality of an act, is pure potentiality, that is, the potentiality of a potentiality” (Agamben 1999: 216).²¹ In any case, potentiality is not negated, but rather preserved and sustained in act. But, for Agamben, the potentiality of a potentiality does not signify simply the zone of undecidability between pure potentiality and pure actuality; rather, the zone of undecidability is brought to light as such. What, in my opinion, acquires for the first time a form of actual presence in pure potentiality is *the very passage itself* where power is put into action. Through the fulfilment of its own impotentiality, an act is able to appropriate the “it”, the ineffable barrier within the sign, or, simply put, the Nothing. The liminal passage where an order shows itself in the emptied out form is assumed without post-foundational concessions, without any discursive-hegemonic supplements for absent communitarian fullness, without ontic substitutes for pure being. The thing that was presupposed by a juridico-political order or a discursive-hegemonic order is assumed fully. Now, for the first time, I think it becomes possible for Agamben possible to dwell on the very passage where we have always been. But when the passage is made present as pure potentiality, then the potentiality-actuality relation and, along the same lines, the subversive interplay of dichotomous opposites is put to a halt.

In the arsenal of Agamben’s terminology, there is a term – i.e., “inoperativity” – that, in my opinion, is well suited to clarify the deactivation and fulfilment of the very undecidable passage between potentiality and actuality.²² Contrary to that what the term may suggest, inoperativity denotes neither a plain

²¹ In chapter eight of the book „Theta“, Aristotle argues for the priority of actuality with respect to potentiality (Aristotle 2006: 1049b-1051a; see also Makin 2006: 181–220).

²² On inoperativity, for instance, see Agamben, G. 2011. *Nudities*. Trans. by D. Kishik & S. Pedatella. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; Agamben, G. 2007. *Profanations*. Trans. by J. Fort. New York: Zone Books.

cancellation nor a substitution of one act with another. To comprehend the meaning of the concept, I take my cue from a short but informative remark in *Homo Sacer*: “The only coherent way to understand inoperativeness is to think of it as a generic mode of potentiality that is not exhausted (like individual action or collective action understood as the sum of individual actions) in a *transitus de potentia ad actum*” (Agamben 1998: 62). Therefore, the task is to think inoperativity as a radical form of potentiality that is not exhausted, but rather preserved in actuality. This generic mode of an inexhaustible potentiality manifests itself in the realisation of impotentiality, owing to which it is possible to dwell on the undecidable passage without looking for excuses in contingent foundations, ontic substitutes for pure being and a nullified order. The passage that is revealed at the end of metaphysics is “retrieved” (*ripren-dere*) (Agamben 2005b: 23–25, 103–104). With the help of impotentiality, it is possible to dwell on the passage between power and act. But as a result, the inexhaustible potentiality renders the very undecidable passage between potentiality and actuality, power and its exercise, inoperative; a *transitus de potentia ad actum* is deactivated and “revoked” (*revocare*). Agamben’s approach absolves us from the “it” (*Ereignis*) or from the articulation of dichotomous opposites that have kept the metaphysical and juridico-political tradition operative. Hence, in my opinion, the inoperativeness consists of a double movement: the retrieval and the revocation. In what follows, I exemplify illustrate this by using examples from Agamben’s own writings.

In *The Time That Remains*, Agamben examines the exemplary text of messianism, the Apostle Paul’s *Letter to Romans*. The second chapter of the book explores in detail the messianic vocation defined by Paul with the syntagma of “as not” (*hos me*) (Agamben 2005b: 23–25). The messianic experience does not simply eliminate all vocations once and for all; nor does the formula of “as not” refer to a simple inactivity, indifference, or sheer idleness. The Apostle Paul displays instead a peculiar relation to the initial vocation: “According to the principle of messianic *klesis*, one determinate factual condition is set in relation to itself – the weeping is pushed toward the weeping, the rejoicing toward the rejoicing” (Agamben 2005b: 24). Dwelling in the messianic time means that every type of activity, or vocation, is brought in a relation to itself. Although the initial form of every act seems to be left intact, the messianic “as not” nevertheless transforms the function of the vocation, which is to say, revokes the act from within. One is weeping *as not* weeping; one is rejoicing *as not* rejoicing. An action assumes itself, in the state of inoperativity. What the messianic vocation enacts is nothing more than the emptied out vocation. This renders visible the vocation itself in its pure mediality or, in other words, in its pure potentiality. The messianic vocation assumes the zone of undecidability between potentiality and actuality, between the exercise and its suspension. Put differently: the messianic vocation assumes and deactivates the potentiality-actuality passage. *A life, lived under the sign of the messianic calling, is the life of a fully assumed inoperativity*. Messianism is, in other words, perfect nihilism that does away even with the nothing itself.

Another example of inoperativity is the resurrected body that Agamben examines in the essay “The Glorious Body” (Agamben 2011: 91–13). In what age exactly is the earthly body resurrected? Are diverse humors (e.g., urine and sweat) extraneous to the glorious body? Do fingernails remain growing? Does the resurrected body maintain sexual and digestive organs? These types of theological questions culminate in the problem of sexual reproduction and nutrition (Agamben 2011: 97). The glorious body, as long as it is identical with the body on the earth, maintains all the vital organs associated with sexual reproduction and nutrition. Yet, according to Agamben, there is a small change: the physiological operation of every single organ is suspended. All natural operations (e.g., procreation) are neutralised. The glorious body displays all the functions in the state of suspension: “The organ or instrument that was separated from its operation and remains, so to speak, in the state of suspension, acquires, precisely for this reason, an ostensive function; it exhibits the virtue corresponding to the suspended operation” (Agamben 2011: 98). The glorious body demonstrates itself in the dimension of pure mediality. The church responds to this by seeking to subject the inoperative body to liturgy. Like commodity, law, and language, the nullified form is thus separated into another sphere. Agamben, however, advocates another approach. From Agamben’s point of view, it is possible to fully assume the potentiality or privation that, in the earthly body, was fixed to the performance of some natural function:

“A new use for the body is thus possible only if it wrests the inoperative function from its separation, only if it succeeds in bringing together within a single place and in single gesture both exercise and inoperativity, economic body and glorious body, function and its suspension” (Agamben 2011: 102).

The potentiality that is liberated from performing some natural operation is enacted out fully. The coincidence of function and its suspension, as I have argued above, can occur only when action realises all its own impotentiality. For Agamben, thus, the glorious body shows a way towards a new use of the common and towards a new paradigm of human action that deactivates the subversive interplay between exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, means and ends, negativity and positivity, the political and politics, a constituting power and a constituted power, a signifier and a signified, particularity and universality – or, simply put, potentiality and actuality.

When, to repeat, pure potentiality becomes absolutely indistinguishable from pure actuality, then the passage from potentiality to actuality is put to a halt. Now, for the first time, one can truly dwell on the very same undecidable terrain where political articulation had instituted a discursive-hegemonic order and where sovereign decision had assured the normal application of a juridico-political order. Heidegger’s *Ereignis*, as we saw above, unveiled the negative limit of the metaphysical tradition – that is to say, the “it” or the unsayable passage between being and beings. For Agamben, in my opinion, *Ereignis* lays bare the unsayable as the limit form of relation between beings and being. But

in order to say the ineffable thing, that is to say, “difference as difference”, it is necessary to attempt to “think the ontological difference *no longer as a relation*, and Being and being *beyond* every form of connection” (Agamben 1998: 61; my emphasis). To seize hold of difference as difference means, according to Agamben, nothing more than to retrieve and revoke the very relation. As I have argued, the only way to achieve this double movement is to reconsider the “modal” concepts. Namely, the inoperativeness of the potentiality-actuality passage goes beyond the ontological difference, beyond the question of being:

“[O]ne must think the existence of potentiality without any relation to Being in the form of actuality – not even in the extreme form of the ban and the potentiality not to be, and of actuality as the fulfilment and manifestation of potentiality – and think the existence of potentiality even *without* any relation to *being* in the form of the gift of the self and of letting be” (Agamben 1998: 47; my emphasis).

As we saw above, potentiality and actuality are conceived as two related modes of being. In line with this, Aristotle considered the being of potentiality in relation to actuality as “the gift” while Heidegger reflected on the being of potentiality as the letting be. For Agamben, however, both approaches are inadequate as long as potentiality is conceived in the mode of being. By reconsidering the potentiality-actuality passage, Agamben goes beyond the very ontological difference between being and beings. That is to say, Agamben’s reinterpretation of “modal” categories brings to light the very relation between being and beings. This retrieval, however, revokes the play between being and beings. That is in my opinion why Agamben deems it necessary to think potentiality not in relation to being. Potentiality no longer takes the form of being. From my perspective, *the inoperativeness of the potentiality-actuality relation coincides with the inoperativeness of the ontological difference*. While Heidegger manages to expose the negative limits of metaphysics, Agamben extinguishes the metaphysical tradition fully without making the zone of undecidability into a negative condition or foundation for practice and action.²³ If Agamben achieves this objective, then he manages to fulfil Heidegger’s proposal to think difference as difference, i.e., the dif-ference.

5.3. Post-Foundational Political Ontology Reconsidered

In the previous two sections, I have laid out the common ground of Agamben’s philosophy and post-foundational political thought. Furthermore I have shown how Agamben deactivates the potentiality-actuality passage or, what amounts to the same thing, the subversive interplay of dichotomous opposites. On the basis

²³ On Agamben’s critique of Heidegger, for instance, see Agamben, G. 2004. *The Open: Man and Animal*. Trans. by K. Attell. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

of this foundation, the three articles of my dissertation rethink the political difference, post-foundationalism, and social antagonism that, in their structure, are different names for the undecidable passage between binary oppositional concepts. In what follows, I summarise how Agamben's interpretation of potentiality transforms Laclau and Marchart's political thinking.

Agamben's philosophy as well as post-foundational political ontology operates in the terrain that emerges from the culmination and exhaustion of metaphysics in nihilism of which the operativity of a nullified order is an exemplary case. Starting from this common ground, I believe, it is possible to understand what distinguishes Laclau and Marchart's post-foundational political ontology from Agamben's philosophy. Whereas Laclau and Marchart deem it necessary to *fill in* the empty form of an order with ontic and hegemonic substitutes, Agamben seeks to render a zero-degree order *inoperative* or, better, to deactivate the passage from potentiality to actuality. To fulfil this objective, Agamben rethinks the metaphysical underpinnings of potentiality. Agamben expresses the contemporary task in these words: "This appears to be precisely the task of coming philosophy: to redefine the entire domain of categories and modality so as to consider no longer the *presupposition* of Being and potentiality, but their *exposition*" (Agamben 1999: 76; original emphasises). As we have seen above, potentiality can be given back to itself as potentiality only with the help of its own constitutive impotentiality. In my three articles, I have used Agamben's reinterpretation of potentiality to rethink the main concepts of post-foundational political ontology such as the political difference between the political and politics, the political acts of grounding, and the antagonistic relation. *All this, taken together, means nothing other than reconsidering political ontology from the ground up.* In the left-Heideggerian political thinking, Agamben and post-Marxism offer two different strategies of how to cope with the completion and exhaustion of the Western tradition in nihilism.

"Political Differentiability", the first article of the dissertation, examines one of the fundamental concepts of contemporary political ontology: the political difference between the political and politics. Marchart thinks the political difference in line with *Identity and Difference* where Heidegger proposes to reflect on "difference *as* difference", i.e., on the very difference between being and beings. Analogously, Marchart wants to offer neither a pure philosophy of the political, nor a pure approach to politics. As an alternative, Marchart seeks to think the political difference *as* political difference that appears for post-foundational political ontology as a never-ending play, or as an unbridgeable split, between the political and politics. Following Agamben, I believe, this differential play only manages to display the unsayability or negativity of the "it" that has sent the historical constellations of the political difference. In my opinion, Marchart's political differencing is nothing more than the pure self-destining that brings to light the differentiated – that is, the historical constellations of the political and politics. This way of conceiving the political difference lays bare the empty form of relation between the political and politics. In its restless operation, the differential play is open but impassable.

In opposition to Marchart, I substantiate the contrary claim: as such, the political difference can become visible only if the mutual grounding of the political and politics is rendered inoperative. To grasp the political difference does not mean the experience, for this reason, of a new epochal constellation of the ontic and the ontological, politics and the political. From my point of view, for Marchart, the political difference is present after it has crossed the passage to actuality. Emphasising the effects, the political difference remains as such an ineffable thing. In any case, one should move away from concentrating on the effects of political differencing. *Only by displacing the problem on the plain of potentiality, it is possible to fulfil the Heideggerian task of thinking the political difference as political difference.* In my view, the political differencing displays itself only through the realisation of its own impotentiality. Putting into action all its own impotentiality, the political difference can show its pure power to differentiate. The power to differentiate, revealed by the actualisation of impotentiality, is nothing more than pure potentiality – or, as I would put it, political differentiability. Political difference turns back upon itself as pure potentiality. Yet, if this event takes place, then political differentiability deactivates the never-ending play between dichotomous opposites. To think the political difference as political difference means to dwell on the passage where the political and politics are not linked anymore through their moment of articulation. The experience of pure potentiality extinguishes the play between the political and politics. What is more, this deactivation does not delimit the political difference either on the philosophical side of the political or on the side of political practiciness. Political differentiability is the common dimension of thinking and political acting.

The second article of the dissertation, “Giorgio Agamben’s ‘Messianic Fulfilment’ of Foundationalism in Politics”, examines Marchart’s post-foundational political thought that, as a response to the breakdown of metaphysics, turns grounding into a never-ending task without a final fulfilment. The absence of an ultimate foundation is made into an ontological condition of contingent foundations; as long as there is no self-grounding foundation, all possible foundations have to be necessarily contingent. Marchart’s thinking performs a double movement: on the one hand, the philosophy of the political difference recognises the impossibility of first philosophy or of pure being-as-foundation; yet, on the other hand, Marchart substitutes political ontology in place of the founding science of all sciences. Agamben, in my opinion, summarises the core idea behind the post-foundational approach with the following words: “[T]he absence of destiny and ground is thus transformed into an *in-finite destiny and ground*” (Agamben 1999: 134; my emphasis). This infinite destiny is nothing more than the groundlessness of Laclau and Mouffe’s articulatory practice that abandons human beings to the endless (re-)grounding of a social totality, to the hegemonic determinations of the very relation between a signifier and a signified, or to the determinations of the passage over potentiality into actuality. Living in the end of metaphysics, human practice remains abandoned to the never-ending process of articulatory practice. The abyss of potentiality, as it

presents itself in the impossibility of an ultimate foundation, is open but impassable.

Counter to Marchart and Laclau's upholding of the nullified self-grounding of the social, Agamben aims at deactivating the undecidable passage of political founding that passes through a hollowed out order and the plurality of its ontic substitutes or, in other words, through potentiality and actuality. Situated on this undecidable passage, political articulation and sovereign decision bring into existence a discursive-hegemonic and juridico-political order respectively. Yet, there is another hidden option endorsed by Agamben. Namely, political groundings, which produce contingent supplements for the structural lack of an ultimate foundation, may be rendered inoperative through "the messianic fulfilment" that entails two moments – that is to say, the moment of retrieval and the moment of revocation (Agamben 2005b: 103–104). To explicate this messianic moment concealed in every moment of foundation, the concept of potentiality becomes again indispensable here. Let us think of political articulation that, as an ungrounded ground, constructs a contingent foundation for the complexity of social relations and identities. As the moment of foundation, however, political articulation does not necessarily have to institute another ontic substitute representing an ultimate foundation in its absence; or, to put the same thing differently: political articulation does not have to bring the ontological and the ontic into a subversive interplay. Against this path chosen by Marchart and Laclau, the political act of institution may actualise its own impotentiality, its own potentiality not to be or do. By doing this, political articulation as well as sovereign decision turns back upon itself, and it exhibits itself as pure potentiality. With impotentiality, an act enacts nothing more than its own potentiality to act. So, then, without the realisation of impotentiality, the retrieval would be impossible. But it is crucial to add that the function or purpose of an action, if it is conceived in the dimension of pure potentiality, is revoked. The messianic fulfilment lets therefore grounding pass. The messianic fulfilment of grounding acts that articulate the boundary between dichotomous opposites is made inoperative. As a consequence, Agamben says: "The *ungroundedness* of man is now proper, that is, absolved from all *negativity* and all having been [...]" (Agamben 1999: 134). Therefore, the task of politics does not necessarily reside in laying foundations for the infinite field of the social as Marchart and Laclau believe, but rather in the deactivation of metaphysical grounding (Marchart 2011: 969–970; Laclau 2014: 115–225).

The third and final article of the present dissertation, "Towards a Rethinking of Laclau and Mouffe's Conception of 'Social Antagonisms': Agamben's Critique of Relation", investigates how Agamben's reinterpretation of potentiality affects Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of social antagonism. What, from my perspective, is at stake in Agamben's sovereign decision and Laclau/Mouffe's political articulation is one and the same thing: that is, the passage (or alternatively, the limit form of relation and the non-relational relation) between dichotomous opposites such as life and law, negativity and positivity, outside and inside, heterogeneity and homogeneity, the political and the social. Making

a decision on the undecidable passage, political articulation and sovereign decision institute an order. Whereas Laclau and Marchart attempt to keep the subversive interplay of dichotomies operative, Agamben does not want to fill in the empty form of an order with ontic substitutes, but rather to render the undecidable passage inoperative. For this reason, Agamben calls into question the non-relational relation of which social antagonism is the principal example. Yet, although the *homo sacer* project challenges the limit form of relation, Agamben does not, in my opinion, advocate a reconciled society. This strategy goes directly against Laclau and Mouffe's presupposition that social antagonism has to be necessarily conceived as the limit form of relation with something non-relational or non-presentable. Like in other cases above, Agamben's understanding of the potentiality-actuality passage offers a point of reference for rethinking the nature of social antagonism.

Instead of putting in place new constellations of dichotomous opposites, Agamben seeks to render the rearticulation of the antagonistic relation and the re-grounding of the sovereign relation inoperative. The inoperativeness transforms political articulation and sovereign decision into a "form-of-life" that "always retains the character of a possibility; that is, it always puts at stake living itself" (Agamben 2000: 4). This form-of-life does not exhaust itself in this or that possibility, in this or that order, or in this or that political existence. Rather, it exposes an inextinguishable potentiality due to which any social formation is unable to coincide with itself. In this sense, the form-of-life expresses the convergence of pure potentiality and pure actuality. The social field cannot coincide with itself as long as an activity is never exhausted in some particular actuality. To move on, as we know, pure potentiality revokes the potentiality-actuality passages or, if you prefer, the never-ending play of binaries (for example, the life-law and *zoe-bios* intersection). That implies that other oppositions, such as being and beings, or the political and politics, are deactivated as well. Contrary to how it may look, I think, Agamben's strategy of deactivation does not eliminate social antagonism in principle. The deactivation of the antagonistic relation does not do away with antagonism as such. As I seek to substantiate in my article, the contrary may be the case: the form-of-life is an antagonistic power that calls into question the hegemonic self-signification of the social. This pure power is a radical heterogeneity that does not let itself be incorporated or articulated into the equivalential chain as one of its moments (see Laclau 2005: 129–156). To sum up, the form-of-life is antagonistic. Thinking, as long as it is inseparable from politics, exemplifies this antagonistic force perfectly.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The present dissertation, *Giorgio Agamben and Post-Foundational Political Ontology*, concentrates on Giorgio Agamben's political philosophy. The dissertation consists of the three articles and the introduction. The main objective of my articles is not to rationally reconstruct Agamben's political philosophy in its entirety. Nor do I want to write Agamben's intellectual biography. Instead of that, I examine Agamben's political philosophy in the light of Oliver Marchart and Ernesto Laclau's post-foundational criticism of Agamben that associates Agamben's *homo sacer* project with the pessimistic reaction to the exhaustion of metaphysical and political categories. The dissertation is a response to this criticism.

Central to the arguments of the dissertation is the potentiality-actuality *passage* without which it would be hard, if not impossible, to understand Agamben's discussion on the topics such as messianism, sovereignty, law, and language. Through numerous archaeologies and philosophical analyses, Agamben demonstrates the importance of potentiality for the ontological structures of metaphysics and politics. He demonstrates that the self-grounding of a juridical order rests on negativity or, to be exact, on the potentiality of the law to suspend its normal functioning and to exist in the state of privation (i.e., in the state of exception). As Agamben emphasises, potentiality (*dynamis*) is constitutively impotentiality (*adynamia*), that is, potentiality (or capability) is constitutively potentiality not to be or do. To be capable of something means simultaneously to be capable of not realising this particular potential. A capability does not thus exist only in act. By virtue of impotentiality, potentiality can turn back upon itself and seize hold of itself as pure potentiality. If one succeeds in bringing into act all its own impotentiality, then one can appropriate and dwell on the potentiality-actuality passage. But, in Agamben's opinion, the same pure potentiality deactivates the potentiality-actuality passage or, in general terms, the subversive interplay between the contingent and the necessary, the negative and the positive, the universal and the particular (see Laclau 1990a: 27).

In my dissertation, I demonstrate that Agamben's account of potentiality transforms the basic tenets of political ontology. Without the concept of potentiality, as my three articles show, it is impossible to grasp the political difference between the political and politics, post-foundationalism, and social antagonism.

The dissertation focuses on three critical issues that Marchart and Laclau raise regarding Agamben's philosophy. *First*, according to Marchart, Agamben's reflections and archaeologies remain trapped into intellectualism. In his view, Agamben collapses "the political difference" between the political (the ontological) and politics (the ontic) on the side of the political. *Second*, from Marchart's and Laclau's perspective, the breakdown of metaphysical grounding discloses the constitutive openness of the social bond; that is why a hegemonic politics can reorganise social relations and identities on the basis of some emancipatory project. In Marchart's view, however, Agamben's ontologising

philosophy destroys this openness. *Last*, from Laclau's point of view, it is not possible to think the antagonistic relation with the help of Agamben's sovereign relation between the all-powerful sovereign and powerless bare life. Additionally, Agamben's critique of sovereignty negates political power and social antagonisms.

My three articles investigate Marchart and Laclau's critical claims from Agamben's perspective.

The *first* article, entitled "Political Differentiability", investigates the political difference between the political and politics that Marchart's *Post-Foundational Political Thought* constructs after the example of the ontological difference between being and beings. Following Heidegger's lead, Marchart claims that the task of contemporary political ontology is to reflect on "the political difference as political difference", that is, on the very political difference itself between the political and politics. The political difference appears, for Marchart, as the never-ending play between the political and politics. From my point of view, however, the political differencing puts too much emphasis on the effects, on the differentiated – that is, on the political and politics. To grasp the political difference as political difference, it is not enough to lay equal stress on the ontic and the ontological. In contrast to Marchart, I think it is possible to experience the political difference itself when the mutual conditioning of the political and politics is made "inoperative". This deactivation, however, does not end in the collapse of the political difference. Through the deactivation, the political difference rather comes first into view as political differentiability, as pure potentiality, that does not bring about a new constellation of the political and politics. As long as political differentiability is the *common* dimension of thinking and acting, Agamben does not fall prey to intellectualism.

The *second* research article ("Giorgio Agamben's 'Messianic Fulfilment' of Foundationalism in Politics") examines post-foundational political thought that experiences the breakdown of metaphysics or, what amounts to the same thing, the absence of an ultimate foundation. In post-foundational political thought, represented by Marchart, foundation is not merely and simply absent, but rather present in the state of privation as the empty form. This deprived form of presence is observable in contingent foundations that signal the absence of an ultimate foundation, i.e., the breakdown of transcendent grounding of all beings. But contingent foundations, as long as they do not negate the metaphysical concept of foundation altogether, embody an ultimate foundation in its absence. Contingent foundations, produced by the political acts of grounding, seek to absolve us from the abyss that nihilism has uncovered. Marchart's political ontology, moreover, is not just an ontology of politics, but rather the ontology of all beings. Political ontology that, in the age of nihilism, takes over the impossible role of a first philosophy represents metaphysics in its absence. In contrast to post-foundational political ontology, Agamben aims at rendering the political acts of grounding inoperative. From my point of view, this does not end up in anti-foundationalism insofar as the deactivation takes place through the "messianic fulfilment" that consists of two interrelated aspects: the moment

of “retrieval” and the moment of “revocation”. The political act of grounding retrieves itself when it turns back upon itself and conveys nothing more than itself in its pure mediality. The retrieval takes place when an act brings into action all its impotentiality and, by doing so, displays itself in the dimension of pure potentiality. But an activity, which transmits only itself and nothing beside itself, revokes its original end. A gesture, for instance, shows an action or movement itself in its pure mediality. Politics is, for Agamben, the exemplary sight of “gesturality” where the empty form of foundationalism can be fulfilled messianically.

The *third* and final article, “Towards a Rethinking of Laclau and Mouffe’s Conception of ‘Social Antagonisms’: Agamben’s Critique of Relation”, examines one of Laclau’s arguments against the philosophy of Agamben: *first*, the sovereign relation between the sovereign power and bare life does not suit for thinking the antagonistic relation; *second*, the idea behind Agamben’s critique of sovereignty is to eliminate entirely social antagonism. To counter these claims, I start by showing the connection between Laclau and Mouffe’s discursive conception of hegemony and Agamben’s archaeology of sovereignty. What, I maintain, is at stake in both cases is the “limit form of relation” (i.e., the “non-relational relation”) that connects the dichotomous opposites such as outside and inside, negativity and positivity, life and law into a subversive interplay. An order, insofar as it is penetrated by the dichotomous tensions, cannot coincide with itself. The hegemonic relation and the sovereign relation are constitutively open for displacements by Laclau and Mouffe’s political articulation and Agamben’s sovereign decision. While, for Laclau, the antagonistic relation can always be rearticulated, Agamben wants to render the discursive reconstruction of the antagonistic relation inoperative, but not because of the pessimistic aversion towards social antagonism, but rather because of the exhaustion of the antagonistic relation of which the collapse of the Left-Right divide is a primary example. The Left-Right distinction, having lost its original content, operates in the emptied out form. *Homo Sacer*, I agree with Laclau, challenges the antagonistic relation but from this it does not automatically follow that Agamben aims at establishing a reconciled society, communitarian fullness. From Agamben’s perspective, antagonism does not have to take the limit form of relation. What, in my opinion, is at stake in political ontology is to think social antagonism as the power of life which ruling “apparatuses” and hegemonic discourses, in spite of their intentions, fail to appropriate. This antagonistic power is perhaps the “form-of-life” that breaks the limits relation between the dichotomous opposites such as outside and inside, negativity and positivity, life and law.

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PUBLICATIONS

SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Giorgio Agamben ja Post-Fundatsionalistlik Poliitiline Ontoloogia

Käesolev väitekirj *Giorgio Agamben and Post-Foundational Political Ontology* keskendub Giorgio Agambeni poliitilisele filosoofiale. Väitekirj koosneb kolmest artiklist ja sissejuhatusest. Minu artiklite põhieesmärgiks ei ole rekonstrueerida Agambeni filosoofiat tervikuna. Samuti ei soovi ma kirjutada Agambeni intellektuaalset biograafiat. Väitekirjas uurin ma Agambeni poliitilist filosoofiat Oliver Marcharti ja Ernesto Laclau post-fundatsionalistliku kriitika valguses, mis seostab Agambeni *homo sacer*'i-projekti pessimistliku reaktsiooniga metafüüsiliste ja poliitiliste põhikategooriate ammendumisele. Väitekirj on vastus sellele kriitikale.

Käesoleva väitekirja kõigi argumentide keskseks teemaks on potentsiaalsuse-aktuaalsuse *üleminekutsoon*. Ilma selleta on raske, kui mitte võimatu mõista Agambeni arutlusi säärastel teemadel nagu messianism, suveräänsus, seadus ja keel. Oma arvukate uurimustega tõendab Agamben potentsiaalsuse olulisust metafüüsika ja poliitika ontoloogilises ülesehituses. Ta näitab, et juriidiline kord rajaneb negatiivsusel ehk täpsemalt öeldes korra võimel peatada oma normaalne kehtimine ja olla kohal enda puududes. Aristotelesele toetudes rõhutab Agamben pidevalt, et potentsiaalsus (*dynamis*) on konstitutiivselt mitte-potentsiaalsus (*adynamis*); potentsiaalsus kui võime ehk oskus on konstitutiivselt ka potentsiaalsus mitte olla või mitte toimida. Olla millekski võimeline tähendab ühtaegu olla võimeline seda konkreetset võimet ka mitte realiseerima. Võime ei eksisteeri seega mitte ainult teos. Veel enamgi – *adynamis*'e läbi võib potentsiaalsus suhestuda endaga, hõlmates ennast kui puhast potentsiaalsust. Kui kellelgi peaks õnnestuma niiviisi realiseerida kogu oma mittepotentsiaalsuse, siis ta saab omandada ja asuda potentsiaalsuse-aktuaalsuse üleminekutsoonis. Ent seesugune puhas potentsiaalsus deaktiveerib Agambeni arvates potentsiaalsuse-aktuaalsuse ülemineku või, teisisõnu, sattumuslikkuse ja paratamatuse, positiivsuse ja negatiivsuse, universaalsuse ja partikulaaruse vastastikuse tingituse (Laclau 1990a: 27).

Väitekirjas on püütud näidata, et agambenlik arusaam potentsiaalsusest kujundab ümber poliitilise ontologia põhijooned. Ilma potentsiaalsuseta, nagu tõestavad kolm artiklit, ei ole võimalik mõista poliitilist diferentsi, post-fundatsionalismi ja sotsiaalseid antagonisme.

Väitekirj keskendub kolmele otsustavale probleemile, mis Marcharti ja Laclau arvates vaevavad Agambeni filosoofiat. *Esiteks* jäävat Agambeni mõtisklused ja „arheoloogiad” Marcharti arvates intellektualismi küüsi. „Homo sacer” tühistavat poliitilisuse (ontoloogilise) ja poliitika (ontilise) diferentsi poliitilisuse kasuks. *Teiseks* toovat metafüüsika kokkuvarisemine Laclau ja Marcharti vaatenurgast vaadatuna ilmsiks sotsiaalse seose konstitutiivse avatuse ehk sattumuslikkuse, mille tõttu hegemoniaalne poliitika võib sotsiaalseid suhteid ja identiteete alati ümber defineerida. Marchart on seisukohal, et Agambeni ontologiseeriv filosoofia hävitab selle avatuse. Kui *kolmandaks* ja viimaks lähtuda

Agambeni suveräänsest suhtest, milles on vastamisi kõikvõimas suverään ja täiesti võimuta „pelk elu“, siis ei ole Laclau arvates üldse võimalik kõnelda antagonistlikust suhtest. Lisaks, nagu nähtub suveräänsuse kriitikast, olevat Agamben vaenulik poliitilise võimu ja sotsiaalse antagonism kui selliste suhtes.

Minu artiklile on neid Marcharti ja Laclau kriitilisi väiteid uuritud Agambeni seisukohalt.

Esimeses artiklis „Political Differentiability“ („Poliitiline diferentseeritavus“) käsitletakse poliitilist diferentsi, mille Marchart konstrueerib Martin Heideggeri olemise ja oleva „ontoloogilise diferentsi“ käsitusele toetudes oma teoses „Post-Foundational Political Thought“. Marchart väidab Heideggerile viidates, et tänapäeva poliitilise ontoloogia põhiülesanne on mõelda „poliitilist diferentsi kui poliitilist diferentsi“, see tähendab poliitilisuse ja poliitika poliitilist diferentsi ennast. Marcharti arvates ilmneb poliitiline diferents poliitilisuse (ontoloogilise) ja poliitika (ontilise) lõputu mänguna nende vastastikusel tingituses. Kuid poliitiline diferents kui mäng rõhutab minu arvates diferentsi ehk diferentseid külgi diferentsis – see tähendab poliitilisust ja poliitikat. Selleks, et kogeda poliitilist diferentsi kui poliitilist diferentsi ennast, ei piisa ainult ontilise ja ontoloogilise võrdväarsuse rõhutamisest. Agambenile tuginedes tulekski arvata, et poliitilist diferentsi on võimalik kogeda ainult siis, kui peatada poliitilisuse ja poliitika mäng. See ei tühistata poliitilist diferentsi. Alles seejärel, kui poliitilisuse ja poliitika mäng deaktiveeritakse, saadakse minu arvates pilku poliitiline diferents ise. See ilmneb kui poliitiline diferentseeritavus ehk eristatavus, kui puhas potentsiaalsus, mis ei tõsta esiplaanile poliitilisuse ja poliitika uut konstellatsiooni. Veelgi enam – võib väita, et Agamben ei lange intellektualismi küüsi, kuna poliitiline eristatavus tähendab mõtlemise ja tegutsemise *ühist* dimensiooni.

Teises artiklis – „Giorgio Agamben's 'Messianic Fulfilment' of Foundationalism in Politics“ („Giorgio Agambeni fundatsionalismi 'messiaanlik täideviimine' poliitikas“) – keskendutakse post-fundatsionalistlikule poliitilisele mõtlemisele, mis kogeb metafüüsika ammendumist ja viimase põhja puudumist. Marcharti järgi ei ole post-fundatsionalistlikus mõtlemises põhi mitte pelgalt puudu, vaid see on puududes pigem kohal kui tühi vorm. Säärane puudu-olu kohal-olu on äratuntav „sattumuslikes põhjades“, mis viitavadki viimase põhja puudumisele ja metafüüsilise põhjamise ammendumisele. Sattumuslikud põhjad on oma fundatsionalistliku olemuse kaotanult õõnsad põhjad ehk mitte-põhjad. Sattumuslikud põhjad, mille on esile toonud poliitilised põhjamisteod, tahavad meid lunastada põhjatusest, mille on paljastanud nihilism. Veelgi enam – Marcharti poliitiline ontoloogia ei ole lihtsalt poliitika ontoloogia, vaid pigem kogu oleva ontoloogia. Poliitiline ontoloogia, mis nihilismi ajastul võtab üle võimatuna näiva esimese filosoofia koha, esindab metafüüsikat selle puudulolus. Erinevalt post-fundatsionalistlikust poliitilisest ontoloogiast seab Agamben oma eesmärgiks seisata poliitilised põhjamis- ehk asutamisteod. Selle strateegia tulemuseks ei ole anti-fundatsionalism, kuna seiskamine toimub „messiaanliku täideviimise“ (ingl. *messianic fulfilment*) läbi. Sellel on kaks omavahel seotud momenti: „tagasisaamine“ (it. *riprendere*) ja „tühistamine“ (it. *revocare*).

Põhjamine ehk asutamine kui tegu saavutab enda tagasi siis, kui ta suhestub endaga ega vahenda mitte midagi muud peale enda oma puhtas „vahenduslikkuses“ (engl. *mediality*). Tagasisaamine leiab aset siis, kui tegutsemine realiseerib kogu oma mittepotentsiaalsuse, näidates ennast sedasi oma puhtas potentsiaalsuses. Ent see tegutsemine, mis vahendab ainult ennast ega mitte midagi muud peale enda, „tühistab“ oma algupärase sihi ja tähenduse. Poliitika on Agambeni jaoks puhta vahenduslikkuse eksemplaarne sfäär, milles võimaldub poliitilisi põhjamistegusid messiaanlikult täide viia. Näiteks vahendab žest tegu või liikumist ennast nende puhtas vahenduslikkuses. Poliitika on Agambeni seisukohalt sfäär, milles viiakse messiaanlikult täide fundatsionalismi puhas vorm.

Kolmandas artiklis – „Towards a Rethinking Laclau and Mouffe’s Conception of ‘Social Antagonisms’: Agamben’s Critique of Relation“ („Laclau ja Mouffe’i ‘sotsiaalsete antagonismide’ kontseptsiooni ümbermõtestamise poole: Agambeni ‘relatsiooni’ kriitika“) – uuritakse Laclau peamisi argumente Agambeni filosoofia vastu. *Esiteks* ei sobivat Agambeni suveräänsuse käsitust, mis vastandab suveräänse võimu ja pelga elu, „antagonistliku suhte“ mõtestamiseks. *Teiseks* ei jätvat Agambeni radikaalne suveräänuse-kriitika ka ruumi ühiskondlikele antagonismidele. Et vastata nimetatud väidetele, alustan sellest, et näitan, kuidas Laclau/Mouffe’i diskursiivse hegemoonia kontseptsioon ja Agambeni suveräänsuse- arheoloogia omavahel seostuvad. Väidan, et mõlema lähenemise puhul on kaalul „piirsuhe“ ehk „mittesuhetuslik suhe“ (ingl. *non-relational relation*), mis liidab niisugused dihhotoomilised vastandid nagu sisemine ja välimine, negatiivne ja positiivne, elu ja seadus teineteist konstitueerivasse vastastikusse mängu. Kord, mida lõhestavad dihhotoomilised pinged, ei ole endaga mitte kunagi kooskõlas. Nii hegemoniaalne kui ka suveräänne suhe on konstitutiivselt avatud. Agambeni suveräänne otsus ja Laclau/Mouffe’i poliitiline artikulatsioon võivad piirsuhte alati uuesti määratleda. Kui Laclau arvates on antagonistliku suhte kuju alati teisendatav, siis Agamben tahab hoopis seisata antagonistliku suhte diskursiivse konstrueerimise, ent seda mitte pessimistlikust vastumeelsusest sotsiaalsete antagonismide suhtes, vaid pigem sellepärast, et antagonism kui suhe on ennast ammendanud. Selle peamiseks näiteks on parempoolsuse ja vasakpoolsuse kollaps. Vasakpoolsuse ja parempoolsuse vastandus, mis on kaotanud oma sisu, eksisteerib kui puhas vorm. Ma olen nõus Laclauga, et „Homo Sacer“ vaidlustab antagonistliku suhte, kuid sellest ei tulene automaatselt, et Agamben tahab rajada harmoonilist ühiskonda, kus puuduksid kõik lõhed. Agambeni seisukohast vaadatuna ei pea sotsiaalne antagonism ilmingimata võtma piirsuhte kuju. Poliitiline ontoloogia peab minu arvates proovima mõelda antagonistlikku suhet kui võimu, mida valitsevad „dispositiivid“ ja hegemoniaalsed diskursused ei suuda isegi oma parima tahtmise korral mitte kuidagi endale allutada.

SUMMARY IN FINNISH²⁴

Giorgio Agamben ja Perustan Jälkeinen Poliittinen Ontologia

Tämä väitöskirja (*Giorgio Agamben and Post-Foundational Political Ontology*) käsittelee Giorgio Agambenin poliittista filosofiaa. Väitöskirja koostuu kolmesta artikkelista ja johdannosta. Artikkeleiden pyrkimyksenä ei ole rationaalisesti rekonstruoida Agambenin poliittista filosofiaa kokonaisuudessaan. Kyse ei myöskään ole Agambenin intellektuaalisesta biografiasta. Sen sijaan väitöskirjassa tarkastellaan Oliver Marchartin ja Ernesto Laclaun Agambeniin kohdistuvaa kritiikkiä, jossa Agambenin *homo sacer* – projekti nähdään pessimistisenä reaktiona metafysiikan ja poliittisten kategorioiden nihilistiseen ehtymiseen. Väitöskirja on vastaus tähän kritiikkiin.

Väitöskirjan keskeinen käsite on *kulkureitti* potentialisuudesta akatuaalisuuteen. Ilman sitä on lähes mahdotonta ymmärtää Agambenin ajattelun muita aiheita – sellaisia kuten messianismi, suvereenisuus, laki ja kieli. Lukuisissa ”arkeologioissaan” ja filosofisissa analyyseissaan Agamben osoittaa, että ajatus potentialisuudesta on keskeinen metafysiikan ja politiikan ontologisille rakenteille. Hän osoittaa, että juridisen järjestyksen perusta lepää negatiivisuudessa ja tarkemmin sanoen lain kyvyssä kumota normaali toimintansa ja olla olemassa tässä kumoamisessa (poikkeustila). Kuten Agamben korostaa, kyky tai potentialisuus (*dynamis*) on olennaisesti samalla impotentiaalisuutta (*adynamia*): potentialisuus on konstitutiivisesti potentialisuutta ei olla tai ei tehdä. Pystyä johonkin merkitsee samalla kykyä olla toteuttamatta tätä määrättyä potentialisuutta. Kyky ei ole olemassa ainoastaan teossa. Impotentiaalisuuden ansiosta potentialisuus voi pitää kiinni itsestään potentialisuutena, joka ei kuluta itseään loppuun aktuaalisuudessa. Jos impotentiaalisuus kyetään tuomaan kokonaisuudessaan tekoon, kyetään omaksumaan kulkureitti potentialisuudesta akatuaalisuuteen ja asuttamaan sitä. Agambenin mukaan tämä sama puhdas potentialisuus kuitenkin myös deaktivoi kulkureitin potentialisuudesta aktuaalisuuteen tai yleisemmin ilmaistuna, subversiivisen pelin kontingentin ja välttämättömän, negatiivisen ja positiivisen sekä yleisen ja erityisen välillä.

Väitöskirjassani esitän, että Agambenin potentialisuuden käsite muuttaa käsitystämme poliittisesta ontologiasta. Ilman potentialisuuden käsitettä on mahdotonta ymmärtää poliittista eroa poliittisen (*the political*) ja politiikan (*politics*) välillä, ”post-foundationalismia” ja sosiaalista antagonismia.

Väitöskirja keskittyy kolmeen Marchartin ja Laclaun esiin nostamaan Agambenia koskevaan kriittiseen kysymykseen. Marchartin mukaan, *ensinnäkin*, Agambenin ajattelu ja hänen ”arkeologiansa” jäävät intellektualismin loukkuun. Hänen mukaansa Agamben palauttaa ”poliittisen eron” poliittisen (ontologinen) ja politiikan (onttinen) välillä poliittisen puolelle. Marchartin ja Laclaun näkökulmasta, *toiseksi*, metafyyssisen perustan tuhoutuminen paljastaa sosiaalisen siteen konstitutiivisen avoimuuden hegemoniselle politiikalle, joka

²⁴ I am grateful to Mika Ojakangas for this translation.

mahdollistaa sosiaalisten suhteiden organisoimisen uudelleen jonkin emansipatorisen projektin pohjalta. Marchartin mukaan Agambenin ontologisoiva filosofia kuitenkin hävittää tämän avoimuuden. *Kolmanneksi*, Laclaun mukaan on mahdotonta ajatella antagonistista suhdetta Agambenin suvereenin käsitteen avulla – käsitteen, joka jakautuu kaikkivoipaan suvereeniin ja voimattomaan paljaaseen elämään. Tämän lisäksi Agambenin suvereenin kritiikki kieltää poliittisen vallan ja sosiaaliset vastakkainasettelut.

Väitöskirjan kolme artikkelia tarkastelevat Marchartin ja Laclaun kriittisiä väitteitä Agambenin näkökulmasta.

Ensimmäisen artikkeli ”Political Differentiability” tarkastelee Marchartin teoksessaan *Post-Foundational Political Thought* hahmottamaa ja ontologiseen olemisen ja olevan väliseen eroon nojaavaa poliittista eroa poliittisen ja politiikan välillä. Heideggeria mukaillen Marchart väittää, että nykyisen poliittisen ontologian tehtävänä on miettiä poliittista eroa poliittisena erona – toisin sanoen eroa poliittisen ja politiikan välillä itsessään poliittisena. Marchartin mukaan tämä ero näyttäytyy loputtomana poliittisen ja politiikan välisenä pelinä. Väitöskirjassani kuitenkin esitän, että Marchartin poliittinen ero korostaa liikaa sitä, mitä se erottaa eli poliittista ja politiikkaa. Jotta poliittinen ero ymmärretään poliittisena, ei riitä, että korostetaan yhtä paljon ontologista ja ontologista puolta. Nähdäkseni vasta sitten, kun toisiaan ehdollistavat poliittinen ja politiikka on tehty toimeksi, on mahdollista kokea poliittinen ero sellaisenaan. Tämä toimeksi tekeminen ei kuitenkaan pääty poliittisen eron häviämiseen. Pikemminkin toimeksi tekemisen avulla poliittinen ero tulee ensimmäistä kertaa esille poliittisena erottelukykynä (*differentiability*), puhtaana potentiaalisuutena, joka ei tuota uutta poliittisen ja politiikan erottavaa rakennetta. Sikäli kuin poliittinen erottelukyky on *yhteistä* ajattelulle ja toiminnalle, Agamben ei sorru intellektualismiin.

Toinen artikkeli ”Giorgio Agamben’s ‘Messianic Fulfilment’ of Foundationalism in Politics” tarkastelee ”post-foundationalistista” poliittista ajattelua, jolle keskeistä on metafysiikan loppu tai – mikä tarkoittaa samaa – lopullisen perustojen poissaolo. Marchartin edustamassa ”post-foundationalistisessa” poliittisessa ajattelussa perusta ei ole ainoastaan ja yksikertaisesti poissa, vaan pikemminkin läsnä puutteena ja tyhjänä muotona. Tämä heikko läsnäolon muoto näyttäytyy kontingenteissa perustoissa, jotka viestittävät lopullisen perustan poissaltoa, toisin sanoen olevan transsendenttisen perustamisen tuhoutumista. Kontingentit perustat, sikäli kuin ne eivät kumoa perustan metafysiikkaa käsitettä kokonaisuudestaan, ruumiillistavat lopullista perustaa sen poissaolossa. Kontingentit perustat, joita tuotetaan perustamisen poliittisilla teoilla, pyrkivät pelastamaan meidät siitä kuilusta, jonka nihilismin aikakausi on paljastanut. Marchartin poliittinen ontologia ei kuitenkaan ole vain politiikan ontologiaa vaan kaikkien olevien ontologiaa. Poliittinen ontologia, joka nihilismin aikakaudella ottaa ensimmäisen filosofian mahdollittoman roolin, edustaa metafysiikkaa sen poissaolossa. Toisin kuin ”post-foundationalistinen” poliittinen ontologia, Agamben pyrkii tekemään ”foundationalismia” ja samalla perustoja luovat poliittiset teot toimimattomiksi. Tämä ei johda ”anti-foundationalismiin”,

sillä toimimattomaksi tekeminen tapahtuu messiaanisessa täyttymyksessä, joka muodostuu kahdesta toisiinsa suhteessa olevasta ulottuvuudesta: vetäytymisen ja kumoamisen momenteista. Perustamisen teko vetäytyy itseensä, kun se kääntyy itseensä ja näyttää itsensä ja pelkästään itsensä sen omassa välitettävyydessään. Vetäytyminen tapahtuu, kun teko tuo aktuaalisuuteen kaiken impotentiaalisuutensa ja niin tehdessään kokee puhtaan potentiaalisuutensa. Aktiivisuus, joka näyttää itsensä puhtaan potentiaalisuuden ulottuvuudessa, kumoo sen alkuperäisen tehtävän. Esimerkiksi ele (*gesture*) paljastaa teon sen omassa välitettävyydessään ja näin tehdessään se kumoo teon alkuperäisen merkityksen. Agambenille politiikka on eleellisyyden (*gesturality*) alue, jossa ”foundationalismin” tyhjä muoto täytetään messiaanisesti.

Kolmas artikkeli ”Towards a Rethinking Laclau and Mouffe Conception of ‘Social Antagonisms’: Agamben’s Critique of Relation” tarkastelee Laclau Agambenin filosofiaan kohdistamia kriittisiä argumentteja. Laclau mukaan, *ensinnäkin*, suvereenin vallan ja paljaan elämän välinen suvereeni suhde ei pysty ajattelemaan antagonistista suhdetta; *toiseksi*, Agambenin suvereenisuuden kritiikin tarkoituksena on tuhota sosiaalinen antagonismi kokonaisuudessaan. Vastauksessani tähän kritiikkiin osoitan, että Laclau ja Mouffen hegemonian diskursiivisen käsitteen ja Agambenin suvereenisuuden arkeologian välillä on yhteys. Molemmissa tapauksissa on kyse suhteen rajamuodosta (i.e. ei-suhteellisesta suhteesta), jossa sellaiset dikotomisat vastakohtat kuten ulkopuoli ja sisäpuoli, negatiivisuus ja positiivisuus, elämä ja laki yhdistyvät subversiivisessä vuorovaikutuksessa. Sikäli kuin järjestystä leimaa tällainen dikotominen jännite, se ei voi käydä yksin itsensä kanssa. Agambenin suvereeni päätös ja Laclau ja Mouffen poliittinen artikulaatio tekevät hegemonisesta ja suvereenista suhteesta konstitutiivisesti avoimia muutoksille ja siirtymille. Laclau mukaan antagonistinen suhde voidaan aina artikuloida uudelleen, kun taas Agamben haluaa tehdä antagonistisen suhteen diskursiivisen rekonstruktion kokonaan toimeksi – ei siksi, että hän tuntisi vastenmielisyyttä sosiaalisia vastakkainasetteluja kohtaan vaan koska antagonistiset suhteet, joista vasemmisto-oikeisto -jako on hyvä esimerkki, ovat ehtyneet. Menetettyään alkuperäisen sisältönsä vasemmisto-oikeisto jako toimii tyhjentyneessä muodossaan. Olen samaa mieltä Laclau kanssa, että Agambenin teos *Homo Sacer* haastaa antagonistisen suhteen, mutta tästä ei automaattisesti seuraa, että Agamben pyrki perustamaan sopusointuisen yhteiskunnan tai yhteisöllisen täyteen. Agambenin näkökulmasta antagonismin ei tarvitse omaksua suhteen rajamuotoa. Poliittisessa ontologiassa panoksena on ajatella sosiaalisia vastakkainasetteluja elämän voimana, jotka hallitsevan ”koneistot” niiden pyrkimyksistä huolimatta eivät kykene alistamaan tai tekemään tyhjäksi.

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- Finnish Cultural Foundation Scholarship (Jyväskylä Ülikool, 1/03/2013 – 28/02/2014)
- Jyväskylä Ülikooli stipendium (Jyväskylä Ülikool, 1/06/2-2014 – 30/08/2014)

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