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Anthropology and Theory of Institutions

Paolo Virno

Translated by Alberto Toscano

1. The animal open to the world

There is no dispassionate inquiry on human nature which does not carry along with it, as a sort of clandestine passenger, at least the sketch of a theory of political institutions. The evaluation of species-specific instinct and drives, the analysis of a mind characterised through and through by the faculty of language, the recognition of the thorny relation between the single human animal and his fellows: all of this always harbours a judgment on the legitimacy of the Ministry of the Interior. And vice versa: there is no theory of political institutions worthy of the name which does not adopt, as its badly hidden presupposition, some representation or other of the traits that mark out *Homo sapiens* from the other animal species. To mention a high-school example, little is understood of Hobbes's *Leviathan* if one disregards his *De homine*.

Let us avoid any misunderstandings: it would be unrealistic, even farcical, to believe that a model of the just society could be deducible from certain bio-anthropological invariants. Every political programme is rooted in an unprecedented socio-historical

context (religious civil wars in Hobbes's case, a productive process directly based on the power of verbal thought in our own), confronting a unique constellation of passions and interests. Nevertheless, collective action is really contingent *precisely because*, while it seizes hold of the most volatile reality, it takes charge, in unpredictable and changing ways, of what is not contingent, which is to say of bio-anthropological invariants themselves. The reference to human nature does not dull, but rather accentuates to the highest degree, the particular and unrepeatable character of a political decision, the obligation to act in due time [*tempo debito*], the perception that yesterday was perhaps too early and tomorrow will be too late.

The link between anthropological reflection and the theory of institutions was formulated pithily by Carl Schmitt in the seventh chapter of his *Concept of the Political*:

One could test all theories of state and political ideas according to their anthropology and thereby classify these as to whether they consciously or unconsciously presuppose man to be by nature evil or by nature good. The distinction is to be taken here in a rather summary fashion and not in any specifically moral or ethical sense. The problematic or unproblematic conception of man is decisive for the presupposition of every further political consideration, the answer to the question whether man is a dangerous being or not, a risky or a harmless creature. ... Ingenuous anarchism reveals that the belief in the natural goodness of man is closely tied to the radical denial of state and government. One follows from the other, and both foment each other. ... The radicalism vis-à-vis state and government grows in proportion to the radical belief in the goodness of man's nature. ... What remains is the remarkable and, for many, disquieting diagnosis that all genuine political theories

presuppose man to be evil, i.e., by no means unproblematic but a dangerous and dynamic being. (*The Concept of the Political*, pp. 58–61).

Were man a meek animal, destined to agreement and mutual recognition, there would be no need at all for disciplinary and coercive institutions. The critique of the State – developed with varying intensity by liberals, anarchists and communists – is fuelled, according to Schmitt, by the prejudicial idea of the 'natural goodness' of our species. An authoritative [*autorevole*] example of this tendency is represented today by the libertarian political stance of Noam Chomsky: he advocates with admirable tenacity the dissolution of centralised apparatuses of power, ascribing to them the mortification of the congenital creativity of verbal language, the species-specific prerequisite that could guarantee for humanity a self-government devoid of established [*consolidate*] hierarchies. However, if – as everything leads one to believe – *Homo sapiens* is a dangerous, unstable and (self-)destructive animal, the formation of a 'unified political body' that would exercise, in Schmitt's terms, an unconditional 'monopoly over political decision', seems inevitable in order to hold him back.

It is not wise to turn up one's philosophically sophisticated nose when faced with the crass alternative between 'man good by nature' and 'man bad by nature'. First of all, because Schmitt himself is well aware of such crassness: he expressly uses this shorthand to evoke the bio-anthropological background which, indifferent as it is to naïve moral qualifications, provokes instead no shortage of theoretical conundrums. But it is not wise to turn up one's nose especially for another reason. It is precisely that seeming crassness which allows us to state, without beating about the bush, [*senza giochi di parole*], the historical-naturalist hypothesis which, by unsettling the conceptual schema outlined by Schmitt, becomes

truly interesting. It is the following: the risky instability of the human animal – so-called *evil*, in brief – does not in any sense imply the formation and perpetuation of that 'supreme empire' which is state sovereignty. On the contrary. 'Radicalism hostile to the state' and to the capitalist mode of production, far from presupposing the innate meekness of our species, can find its genuine basis in the full recognition of the 'problematic' character of the human animal – which is to say its indefinite and potential (in other words, also dangerous) character. The critique of the 'monopoly over political decision', and generally of institutions whose rules function as compulsions to repeat, must rest precisely on the acknowledgment that man is 'bad by nature'.

2. The excess of drives and the modality of the possible

What does the 'evil' with which, according to Schmitt, every theory of institutions that demonstrates a smidgen of realism regarding human nature consist in? He refers, albeit in passing, to the theses of the most democratic among the founding members of philosophical anthropology, Helmut Plessner. I will limit myself to recalling a few key ideas of philosophical anthropology considered as a whole, leaving aside any distinctions (which are in other respects significant) between the different authors.

Man is 'problematic', according to Plessner and then Gehlen, because he is deprived of a definite environment, corresponding point by point to his psychosomatic configuration and the organisation [*corredo*] of his drives. If the animal embedded in an environment reacts with innate assuredness to external stimuli, man, environmentally disoriented as he is, has to wrestle with a flood of suggestions devoid of a precise biological finality. Our species is characterised by its 'openness to the world' – if we

understand by 'world' a vital context which is always unpredictable and partially undetermined. The overabundance of stimuli unconnected to any definite operative task elicits an enduring uncertainty and a disorientation which can never be entirely dispelled: in Plessner's terms, the animal 'open to the world' always maintains a non-adherence, or a 'detachment', with regard to the states of affairs and events he encounters. Openness to the world, with the rather high degree of undifferentiated potentiality it implies, is correlated, in terms of phylogeny, with low instinctual specialisation, as well as with neoteny, which is to say the permanence of infantile characteristic even in adult subjects.

These rather generic indications are sufficient, however, to qualify the 'dangerousness' of *Homo sapiens* which, according to Schmitt, is called upon by the modern theory of state sovereignty (and which, according to Freud, can only be attenuated by a normative order entirely comparable to the compulsion to repeat). The overabundance of stimuli which are not biologically finalised and the consequent variability in behaviours are accompanied by a congenital fragility in the inhibitory mechanisms: the animal 'open to the world' displays a virtually limitless intra-species aggressivity, whose triggering causes are never reducible to a definite list (habitational density of a territory, sexual selection, etc.), since they are themselves infinitely variable (cf. Lorenz 1963, pp. 297-336). Struggles for prestige alone, and even the notion of 'honour', have a very close relationship with the structure of drives of an environmentally dislocated living being, one which is, for this very reason, essentially potential in character. The lack of a univocal *habitat* makes culture into 'man's first nature' (Gehlen 1940, p. 109). However, it is precisely culture which, as an innate biological *dispositif*, displays a fundamental ambivalence: it blunts danger, but, in other respects, it multiplies and diversifies the occasions of risk;

it ‘defends man from his very nature’, sparing him the experience of his ‘own terrifying plasticity and indeterminateness’ (Gehlen 1956, p. 97), but, being itself the principal manifestation of this very plasticity and inderteminateness, it simultaneously favours the full unfolding of the nature from which it was supposed to protect us.

So-called ‘evil’ can also be described by calling attention to some salient prerogatives of verbal language. Problematic – that is to say unstable and dangerous – is the animal whose live is characterised by *Negation*, by the *modality of the possible*, by *infinite regress*. These three structures encapsulate the emotive situation of an environmentally disoriented animal. Negation is inseparable from a certain degree of ‘detachment’ from one’s vital context, sometimes even from the provisional suspension of sensory stimulus. The modality of the possible coincides with a biologically non-finalised excess of drives, as well as with the non-specialised character of the human animal. Infinite regress expresses the ‘opening to the world’ as chronic incompleteness, or even, but it amounts to the same thing, as the futile quest for that proportionality between drives and behaviours which is instead the prerogative of a circumscribed environment. The logical basis of metaphysics simultaneously [*a un tempo*] the outlines of a theory of the passions. Pain, empathy, desire, fear, aggressivity: these affects, which we share with many other animal species, are reconfigured from top to bottom by negation, by the modality of the possible, by infinite regress. Then there are those affects which, far from being reconfigured, are even provoked by these linguistic structures: *boredom*, for example, is nothing but the emotional correlate of infinite regress, of the petrified movement that seems to remove a limit only to reconfirm it over and over again; or like *anxiety* (i.e. an indefinite apprehension, which is not bound to a specific state of affairs) is the emotive aspect of the modality of the possible. As for negation,

it is precisely to it that we owe the eventuality of a *failure of mutual recognition* among co-specifics (cf. Virno 2004). The perceptual evidence 'this is a man' loses its irrefutability once it is subjected to the work of the 'no': anthropophagy and Auschwitz are there to prove it. Placed at the borders of social interaction, the possibility of non-recognition also has repercussions at its centre and permeates its entire fabric. Language, far from attenuating intra-specific aggressivity (as Habermas and a number of contented philosophers assure us), radicalises them beyond measure.

1.2 Ambivalence

The dangerousness of our species is coextensive with its capacity to accomplish innovative actions, that is actions which are capable of modifying established habits and norms. Whether we're talking about the excess of drives or linguistic negation, of a 'detachment' from one's vital context or of the modality of the possible, it is entirely obvious that what we are pointing to are not just the premises of subjugation and torture, but the prerequisites that permit the invention of factory councils or other democratic institutions based on that topically political passion which is *friendship without familiarity*. Both 'virtue' and 'evil' presuppose a deficit of instinctive orientation and feed on the uncertainty experience in the faced of 'that which can be differently than it is' (this is how Aristotle defines the contingency that characterises the praxis of the 'animal that has language', EN, VI, 1140b27). The bio-linguistic preconditions of so-called 'evil' are the same as the ones that subtend 'virtue'. Just think of negation again: it is capable of rupturing, or bracketing, the empathy among cospecifics guaranteed by the cerebral mechanism of mirror neurons (Gallese 2003), making it possible to state something like 'this is *not* a man'

in the presence of a Jew or an Arab. We must add, however, that the possibility of a reciprocal *mis*-recognition is kept at bay (precisely in a virtuous way) by the same faculty of negating any semantic content which made it possible in the first place. The public sphere – woven of persuasive discourses, political conflicts, pacts, collective projects – is nothing but a second negation with which the first one, i.e. the syntagm 'non-man', is always stifled again. In other words, the public sphere consists in a *negation of the negation*: 'not non-man'. The patent identity between the species-specific resources enjoyed by virtuous innovation and the ones which nourish homicidal hostility does not authorises us, even for a moment, to mitigate 'evil', to consider it as a peripheral nuisance, or worse, as the indispensable impetus behind 'good'. On the contrary: the only truly *radical*, which is to say inexorable and lacerating, evil is precisely and solely the evil that shares the same root as the good life.

The complete co-extensiveness between threat and shelter allows us to place the problem of political institutions on a firmer basis. This if for at least two reasons. Above all, because it introduces the suspicion that the apparent shelter (state sovereignty, for instance) constitutes, in some cases, the most intense manifestation of the threat (intra-specific aggressiveness). Furthermore, because it suggest a methodological criterion of some relevance: institutions truly protect us if, and only if, they enjoy the same background conditions which, in other respects, do not cease to fuel the threat; if, and only if, they draw apotropaic resources from the 'openness to the world' and from the faculty of negating, from neoteny and from the modality of the possible; if, and only if, the exhibit at each and every moment their belonging to the category of 'that which can be different than it is'.

Wishing to defuse the little dialectic scheme, according to which the (self-)destructive drives of the linguistic animal would be destined to empower and perfect always and evermore the synthesis represented by the state, contemporary critical thought – from Chomsky to French post-structuralism – has deemed it convenient to expel from its horizon, together with dialectics, the very memory of those (self-)destructive drives. In so doing, contemporary critical thought risks corroborating Schmitt's diagnosis: 'radicalism hostile to the State grows in proportion to the faith in the radical goodness of human nature'. Everything suggests that we are dealing with a dead end. Rather than abrogating the negative if only to avoid the dialectical grindstone, it is necessary to develop a non-dialectical understanding of the negative. With this end in mind, three keywords show their usefulness: ambivalence, oscillation, the disturbing. *Ambivalence*: friendship without familiarity, the authentic nub of a political community, can always turn into the familiarity loaded with enmity that fuels massacres between factions, gangs, tribes. There is no pacifying third term, which is to day a dialectical synthesis or superior point of equilibrium: each polarity refers back to the other; or rather, it already contains it within itself, it already lets us glimpse the other in its own fabric. *Oscillation*: the mutual recognition among co-specifics is marked by a ceaseless back-and-forth which goes from partial achievement to incipient failure. *Disturbing*: what is frightening is never the unfamiliar, but only that with which we have the greatest acquaintance (the excess of drives, the infrastructure of verbal language) and which, in varying circumstances, has even exercised or could exercise a protective function.

1.3 Murmurs in the desert

The relation between the redoubtable aspects of human nature and political institutions is without doubt a meta-historical question. In order to confront it, it is not much use evoking the kaleidoscope of cultural differences. However, as always happens, a meta-historical question gains in visibility and weight only within a concrete socio-historic conjuncture. The invariant, that is the congenital (self-)destructiveness of the animal who thinks with words is thematised as the 'argument' of a 'function' which is entirely made up of contingent crises and conflicts. In other words: the problem of intra-specific aggressiveness jumps to the foreground *once* the modern centralised state experiences a noteworthy decline, albeit one which is marked by convulsive restorative impulses and disquieting metamorphoses. It is in the midst of this decline, and because of it, that the problem of institutions, of their regulative and stabilising role, makes itself felt in all its bio-anthropological scope.

It is Schmitt himself who acknowledges, with patent bitterness, the collapse of state sovereignty: [insert quote]. The erosion of the 'monopoly over political decision' derives as much from the nature of the current productive process (based on abstract knowledge and linguistic communication), as from the social struggles of the sixties and seventies, and from the subsequent proliferation of forms of life refractory to a 'preliminary pact of obedience'. It is not important here to dwell on these causes or to rehearse other possible ones. What matter instead are the question-marks that hover over the new situation. *What political institutions can there be outside of the state apparatus? How is the instability and dangerousness of the human animal to be held in check, where we can no longer count on a 'compulsion to repeat' in the application of the rules which are in effect at any given time? In what way can the excess of drives and the*

openness to the world act as a political antidote to the poisons they themselves secrete?

These question refer back to the thorniest episode in the Jewish exodus: the 'murmurs' in the desert, that is a sequence of singularly bitter internecine struggles. Rather than submitting to the pharaoh or rising up against his rule, the Jews took advantage of the principle of the *tertium datur*, seizing a further and unprecedented possibility: to abandon the 'house of slavery and iniquitous labour'. So they venture into a no man's land, where they experience unheard-of forms of self-government. But the bond of solidarity grows weak: the longing for the old oppression grows, the respect for one's comrades in the flight suddenly turns into hatred, violence and idolatry run rampant. Schisms, hostility, slander, polymorphous aggression: this is how, on the slopes of the Sinai, there appears [Schmitt quote from CP]. The narrative of the exodus is perhaps the most authoritative theological-political model for the overcoming of the State. This is because it projects the possibility of undermining the pharaoh's monopoly of decision by means of a resourceful subtraction; but also because, by drawing attention to the 'murmurs' it rules out the idea that this subtraction is based on the natural meekness of the human animal. The exodus refutes Schmitt: a Republic which is no longer a state enjoys a very close and open relationship with the innate destructiveness of our species.

2. Natural-historical institutions

Not only does 'radicalism hostile to the State' not hesitate in recognizing the (self)destructive drives of the living being endowed with speech, but it takes them so seriously that it deems

unrealistic, or even intensely harmful, the antidote envisaged by the theories of sovereignty. I would like to elaborate some further conjectures on the form and functioning of political bodies which, though they closely tackle the fearsome aspects of human nature, nevertheless appear incompatible with the 'monopoly over political decision'.

I will try to developp these conjectures without alluding to what *could be*, but focusing my gaze on what is *always already there*. In other words, I will neglect for the time being the need to invent political categories worthy of current social transformations, in order to fix my attention on two macroscopic anthropological – or rather *anthropogenetic* – realities which constitute, to all intents and purposes, institutions: language and ritual. They are precisely the institutions that display with the greatest clarity all the prerequisites that my sequence of questions has just enumerated: acknowledgment of the impossibility of exiting the state of nature, back-and-forth between regularity and rules, reciprocal commutability between matters of principle and matters of fact, an intimate acquaintance with ambivalence and oscillation. These two natural-historical institutions, of which I will say the bare minimum, are *not*, however, political institutions. Nevertheless, we cannot exclude the possibility of finding in our tradition one or more conceptual devices that represent the properly political equivalent of language or ritual. In our tradition: even here, as you can see, I am not invoking what will come, but what has been. Concerning ritual, let me propose the following hypothesis:: the manner in which it confronts and mitigates always anew the dangerous instability of the human animal has a correlate in the theological-political category of *katechon*. This Greek word, employed by the apostle Paul in the second letter to the Thessalonians and then repeatedly recovered by conservative

doctrines means 'that which restrains', a force that always yet again defers the ultimate destruction. Now, it seems to me that concept of *katechon*, as the political aspect of ritual practices, is more than useful in order to define the nature and tasks of institutions which no longer belong to the state. Far from being an intrinsic cog in the theory of sovereignty, as Schmitt and company claim, the idea of a force that restrains so-called 'evil', without however ever being capable of expunging it (since its expunction would correspond to the end of the world, or better, to the atrophy of the 'openness to the world'), is instead well suited to the anti-monopolistic politics of exodus.

2.1 Language

Language has a preindividual and suprapersonal life. It concerns the individual human animal only to the extent that the latter belongs to a 'mass of speaking beings'. Precisely as freedom or power, it exists solely in the relation *between* the members of a community. Bifocal sight, the autonomous possession of every isolated man, can further be considered, rightly, a shared endowment of the species. Not so for language: in its case it is the sharing that creates the endowment; it is the *between* of inter-psychic relations which then determines, as if by resonance, an intra-psychic asset. Natural-historical language testifies to the priority of the 'we' over the 'I', of the collective mind over the individual mind. That is why, as Saussure does not tire of repeating, language is an institution. It is for this reason, in fact, that it is a 'pure institution', the matrix and yardstick for all the others.

Such a judgment would not be fully justified, however, if language, beside being suprapersonal, did not also exercise an integrative and

protective function. For every authentic institution stabilises and repairs. But what lack does natural-historical language need to fill? And what risk must it protect us from? Both the lack and the risk have a precise name: the faculty of language. This faculty – that is the biological disposition to speak of each single individual – is a simple potentiality which remains devoid of actual reality, all too similar to an aphasic state. As Saussure writes: [quote]. Language – as a social fact or pure institution – compensates for individual *infancy*, that is for that condition in which one does not speak though one possess the capacity to do so. It protects us from the first and gravest danger to which the neotenous animal is exposed: a power that remains such, devoid of corresponding acts. The difference between the faculty of language and historically determinate laws – a difference which, far from being elided, persists into adulthood, making itself felt every time a statement is produced – confers an institutional tonality to the natural life of our species. It is precisely this difference which implies an extremely close link between biology and politics, between *zoon logon ekon* and *zoon politikon*.

Language is the institution that makes possible all the other institutions: fashion, marriage, law, the State – the list goes on. But the matrix is radically distinct from its by-products. According to Saussure, the functioning of language cannot be compared to that of the law or the State. The undeniable analogies reveal themselves to be deceptive. The transformation over time of the civil code has nothing in common with the mutation of consonants or the alteration in certain lexical values. The gap that separates the 'pure institution' from the socio-political apparatuses with which we are familiar is perhaps quite instructive for an investigation such as ours. If we wish to employ the terminology used hitherto, we could say that only language is an effectively *worldly* institutions,

which is to say such as to reflect in its very way of being the overabundance of biologically non-finalised stimuli, not to mention the chronic 'detachment' of the human animal vis-à-vis its own vital context.

Language is both the most natural and the most historical of human institutions. *More natural*: unlike fashion or the State, it is founded on a 'special organ prepared by nature', that is on that innate biological disposition represented by the language faculty. *More historical*: while marriage and the law are suited to certain natural facts (sexual desire and the raising of offspring, for the former; symmetry of exchanges and the ratio between harm and penalty, for the latter), language is never constrained by an objective domain, but concerns instead the entire experience of the animal open to the world, and therefore the possible as much as the real, the unknown to the same extent as the customary. Fashion is not localisable in an area of the brain, yet it must always respect the proportions of the human body. On the contrary, language depends on certain generic conditions, but enjoys an unlimited field of application (since it is itself capable of always expanding it anew). Let us listen to Saussure again: [quote]. Language, by mirroring the typically human lack of a circumscribed and predictable environment is [quote]; but it is precisely its unlimited variability, in other words its independence from factual circumstances and natural data, which offers a perspicuous protection vis-à-vis the risks which are connected to that lack.

The pure institution, which is simultaneously the most natural and the most historical of institutions, is also however an *insubstantial* institution. Saussure's *idée fixe* is well known: language contains no positive reality, endowed with autonomous consistency, but only differences and differences among differences. Each term is defined

only by its 'non-coincidence with the rest' (ibid., p. 219), which is to say by its opposition or heterogeneity with respect to all the other terms. The value of a linguistic element consists in its *not being*: *x* is something only and precisely because it is not *y*, not *z*, not *w*, and so on. The speaking being's capacity to negate some worldly state of affairs, sometimes even to the point of deactivating perceptual proof, is limited to the reprise and exteriorisation of the 'complex of eternally negative relationships' which has always characterised the interior life of language. Negation, which is to say what language *does*, must be understood above all as something that language *is*. The pure institution does not *represent* any given force or reality, but may *signify* them all thanks to the negative-differential relationship entertained by its components. It is not the spokesperson or trace of anything, and it is precisely in this way that it shows its inseparability from 'a being founded primarily on detachment'.

Is it conceivable that a *political* institution – in the most rigorous acceptation of this adjective – borrow its own form and functioning from language? Is it plausible for there to be a Republic which protects and stabilises the human animal in the same way that language performs its protective and stabilising role vis-à-vis the language faculty, which is to say neoteny? Can there be an insubstantial Republic, based on differences and differences among differences, a non-representative Republic? I cannot answer these questions. Like anyone else, I too am suspicious of beguiling allusions and speculative short-circuits. Having said that, I think that the current crisis of State sovereignty makes such questions legitimate, stripping them of any vain or complacent air. The idea that the self-government of the multitude may conform itself directly to the linguistic character of man, to the disturbing

ambivalence that marks him, should at the very least remain an open problem.

2.2 Ritual

Ritual registers and confronts all sorts of crises: the uncertainty that paralyses action, the terror of the unknown, the intensification of aggressive drives at the heart of the community. In the most significant cases, the crisis that ritual is preoccupied with does not concern however this or that determinate behaviour, but rather involves the very conditions of possibility of experience: the unity of self-consciousness and the openness to the world. Ernesto De Martino refers to the crucial occasions in which the I crumbles and the world seems about to end as 'crises of presence'. In these circumstances, the partial reversibility of the anthropogenetic process is starkly manifest. In other words, the possession of those fundamental prerequisites that make a human animal into a human animal becomes insecure. Ritual fulfils a therapeutic function not because it erects a barrier against the 'crisis of presence' but, on the contrary, because it retraces all its steps and attempts to invert the polarity of each and every one of them. Ritual praxis bears out the extreme danger, dilates uncertainty and chaos, returns to the primal scene of hominisation. Only thus, after all, can it perform a symbolic repetition of anthropogenesis, ultimately reaffirming the unity of the I and the openness to the world. According to De Martino, psycho-pathological collapse and the catastrophe of associated life are held back by 'cultural apocalypses', that is by collective rituals that mimic destruction in order to ward it off [*rintuzzarla*]. Cultural apocalypses are institutions based on *ambivalence* and *oscillation*. This is the ambivalence of critical situations, in which only loss offers a chance of deliverance, and

there is no shelter save for that which danger itself delineates. And it is the oscillation between something familiar which becomes disturbing and something disturbing which once again emits familiarity.

The crisis of presence follows two opposite and symmetrical paths. It can consist of a painful 'semantic defect', but also, inversely, of the uncontrollable inflationary vortex provoked by a 'semantic excess which cannot be resolved into determinate meanings' (De Martino 1977, p. 89). The *semantic defect* is inseparable from a reduction of human discourse to a finite series of monochord signals. The I is reabsorbed into a chaotic world whose parts, far from still constituting discrete units, merge into an unstable and enveloping *continuum*. In the first case we are dealing with acts without power; in the second, with power without acts: these are the specular ways in which the regression of the anthropogenetic process manifests itself, in other words, to adopt De Martino's terminology, as the risk of the 'end of the world'.

The cultural apocalypse is the ritual counterpart of the state of exception, It too implies the suspension of ordinary laws, letting certain traits of human nature emerge (the crisis and repetition of the same anthropogenetic process) in a particular historical conjuncture. Like the state of exception, the cultural apocalypse too delineates a domain in which it is impossible to discern with confidence the grammatical level from the empirical one, the general rule from the individual application, matters of principle from matters of fact. The cultural apocalypse, just like the state of exception, makes it so that every normative proposition shows that it is both an instrument of testing and a reality to be tested, a unit of measure and a measurable phenomenon. The state of exception has today become the enduring condition of associated life. It is no longer a circumscribed interval – inaugurated and closed by the

sovereign – but a permanent tonality of action and discourse. This also goes for the ritual. The cultural apocalypse is not confined to a special space and time, but now concerns all the aspects of contemporary experience. The reason for this is simple. The institutional task of ritual lies in containing the extreme dangers which menace the *openness to the world* of the linguistic animal. Well, in an era in which the openness to the world is no longer veiled or dulled by social pseudo-environments, but can even be said to represent a fundamental technical resource, this task must be carried out without any pause [*senza soluzione di continuità*]. The oscillation between the loss of presence and its restoration characterises every moment of social praxis. The ambivalence between the symptoms of crisis and the symbols of deliverance pervades the average everyday.

It remains to ask whether cultural apocalypse, that is the natural-historical institution which hold back radical evil through oscillation and ambivalence, possesses a strictly political correlate. Whether ritual, besides spreading through all the interstices of profane time, may also give us some hints regarding the possible functioning of a Republic no longer linked to the state. My reply to these questions is affirmative. As I already suggested, I think that the ancient concept of *katechon*, of a 'force that restrains', constitutes the plausible political equivalent of cultural apocalypses; and that this concept, like that of cultural apocalypse, is by no means inexorably tied to the vicissitudes of State sovereignty.

2.3 Katechon

In his second letter to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul speaks of a force that restrains the dominance of iniquity in the world, always

deferring the triumph of the Antichrist anew. To restrain, to defer: these terms have nothing in common with 'expunging' or 'defeating', or even with 'circumscribing'. What restrains cannot keep its distance from what it restrains, but remains in proximity to it, and even cannot fail to mix with it. The *katechon* does not vanquish evil, but limits it and parries its strikes each and every time. It does not save from destruction, but rather holds it back, and in order to hold it back, it conforms to the innumerable occasions in which it may manifest itself. It resists the pressure of chaos by adhering to it, just like the concave adheres to the convex. The border line between the *katechon* and the Antichrist does not belong exclusively to either of the two adversaries: analogously to the ritual device described by Ernesto de Martino, this line is both the symptom of the crisis and the symbol of deliverance, the expression of iniquity and a physiognomic trait of virtue. Or better, it is the one only because it is the other.

In mediaeval and modern political thought, the *katechon* was initially identified with the temporal power of the Church, then with the centripetal institutions of the sovereign State, which, by imposing a preliminary pact of obedience, aimed to offset the disintegration of the social body. This is what Carl Schmitt writes in his *Nomos of the Earth* (1950, p 43): [quote]. This is certainly not the place for a detailed discussion of the conservative and state-worshipping use of the notion of *katechon*. Let a single observation suffice for the moment: Schmitt and his family album (Hobbes, De Maistre, Donoso Cortès) evoke a 'force that restrains' to indicate *generically* the stabilising and protective role that befalls political institutions faced with the dangerousness of the disoriented and neotenous animal. Such a role is fundamental but does not represent a discriminating element: it may be claimed, in principle, by the most diverse types of political institution (to be clear: from

an anarchist commune to a military dictatorship), as well as by innumerable non-political institutions (beginning with language and ritual). Grasped in its generic sense, the *katechon* is a ubiquitous and pervasive property, perhaps even a bio-anthropological invariant. The salient point in Schmitt and authors close to him is not at all in he reference to a 'force that restrains', but its unequivocal attribution to state sovereignty. The question of the *katechon* is freed from these associations once the necessity of an institutional protection is stipulated, while at the same time rejecting the idea that the State and its associated 'monopoly over the political decision' can guarantee it (given that it is precisely they which constitute the utmost danger). Since dissimilar, or even diametrically opposed ways of containing the risky instability of the linguistic animal are in competition, it seems legitimate not only to disentangle the idea of *katechon* from the 'supreme empire' of the State, but also to juxtapose the two. All of this does not hold, of course, for those who critique the State while trusting in the innate meekness of our species. For them, a 'force that restrains' is always deserving of contempt; for them, the appropriation of the *katechon* by authoritarian political thought is therefore entirely legitimate, or rather unimpeachable. But I'd rather disregard such stances.

If we equate the concept of *katechon* with the apotropaic function involved in any political (and non-political) institution, we are led to conclude that it surpasses and exceeds that of State sovereignty: between the two concepts there lies an insurmountable gap, the same gap that separates the genus from the species, the phrase 'linguistic animal' from the phrase 'university professor'. If we turn our attention instead to the truly peculiar aspects of the *katechon*, which is to say to what makes it a proper name, it is not difficult to recognise its radical heterogeneity with respect to the form of

protection envisaged by State sovereignty (whose crux, as we know, is the exit from the state of nature and the preliminary pact of obedience). Let us follow this second path. In order to grasp the characteristic features of the *katechon* as a political institution, those aspects that relate it to cultural apocalypses and oppose it to the modern central State, we need to pause for a moment on its theological make-up.

The *katechon* is marked by an internal antinomy. It hold back the Antichrist, radical evil, polymorphous aggressiveness. But in the second book of the Apocalypse the triumph of the Antichrist constitutes the necessary premise for the second coming of the Messiah, the *parousia* which will accord eternal salvation to creatures by putting an end to the world. This is the double bind to which the *katechon* is subject: if it restrains evil, the final defeat of evil is hindered; if aggressiveness is limited, the ultimate annihilation of aggressiveness is forestalled. Of course, blunting ever anew the dangerousness of the species *Homo sapiens* means avoiding its lethal expression, but it also, and perhaps above all, means prohibiting its definitive expunction: that expunction, to be clear, that the theories of sovereignty seek by means of the stark caesura between state of nature and civil state. From a logical point of view, the antinomy that lurks in the institution-*katechon* is perhaps comparable to the paradoxical injunction 'I command you to be spontaneous': if I am spontaneous, I am not, since I am obeying an order; if I obey the order, I am not really obeying, because I am being spontaneous. From a political point of view, the same antinomy becomes remarkably productive, inasmuch as it delineates a model of institutional protection according to which the (self)destructive drives linked to the openness to the world can only be confronted thanks to the same bio-linguistic conditions

(neoteny, negation, the modality of the possible, and so on) which constitute the foundations and guarantee of that very openness.

Let us reiterate once more the crucial point. By hindering the triumph of the Antichrist, the *katechon* simultaneously hinders the redemption at the hand of the Messiah. To restrain iniquity entails renouncing the restitution of innocence. The *katechon* – a radically anti-eschatological theologico-political concept – is opposed to the 'end of the world', or better, to the atrophy of the openness to the world, to the various ways in which the crisis of presence can manifest itself. Both evil triumphant and the total victory over evil imply that end, which is to say this atrophy. The *katechon* is a protection against the lethal instability that emanates from the Antichrist, but equally from the messianic state of equilibrium; it protects from terrifying chaos as well as from redemptive entropy. Not only does the *katechon* oscillate between the negative and the positive, without ever expunging the negative, it preserves oscillation as such, its persistence.

In strictly political terms, the *katechon* is a republican institution designed to forestall two catastrophic possibilities which can undermine the very root of social interaction: the case in which the regularity of species-specific behaviours becomes prominent, albeit devoid of any determinate rule whatsoever (semantic excess); and the diametrically opposed case in which a set of rules is in force which, having been sundered from regularity, require an automatic and uniform application (semantic deficit). Thus, the *katechon* is the republican institution that holds back the risks implicit in the instability of 'a being primarily founded on detachment', though it simultaneously counters the rather menacing ways in which the modern State has sought out a protection from those very risks. Not unlike the 'irregular institutions' (leagues, councils, assemblies) that characterise the political existence of the

multitude according the Hobbes, the *katechon* is doubly tied to circumstances and occasions. It does not exercise a centralising synthesis with regard to concrete forms of life, powers and local conflicts, but instead carries out a contingent and very precise task. The *katechon* is the institution best suited to the permanent state of exception, to the partial lack of distinction (or reciprocal commutability) between matters of principle and matters of fact that characterise it. In other words, it is the institution best suited to the state of exception once the latter, far from still being a prerogative of the sovereign, signals instead the action and discourse of the multitude.

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