Out of the Biopolitical Double Bind:
Universal Singularity, Singular Inversion, and
Subtractive Unworking*

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Abstract
Agamben’s theorization of biopolitics highlights the immanent structure of modern political power. Politics no longer maintains an external position of transcendence over life; rather, what emerges is an immanent double bind in which life and politics interpenetrate each other. Following his account and enlisting Žižek and Badiou, this essay aims to clarify how Agamben’s ontopolitical “unworking” (désœuvrement) can deactivate this biopolitical power. The first part of this essay delineates the structure of this double bind and emphatically depicts the subject’s identificatory participation in bringing biopolitics into existence. The second part elucidates the two sides of “universal singularity” and centers on Agamben’s elaboration of Benjamin’s concepts of “singular inversion” and “real state of exception.” In light of Žižek’s criticism of Agamben’s lack of a theory of the subjective act, the last part attempts to find the contour of such theory in him. Agamben’s concepts of the “non-non-Jew” and “unworking” are expounded and brought into connection with Žižek’s conceptualization of “parallax” and “subtraction.” Furthermore, this part seeks to show how unworking or “sabbatism” can induce a singular mode of subjectification, how the sabbatical praxis of no-exception can untie the double bind between life and power, and how life beyond this biopolitical aporia can be envisaged.

Keywords
Agamben, biopolitics, exception, universal singularity,
singular inversion, subtraction, unworking

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The Tathāgata says that worlds are not worlds and thus are called “worlds.” ... The Tathāgata says that living things are not living beings and thus are called “living things.”

—The Diamond Sutra

The Biopolitical Zone of Indistinction

In his later years, Michel Foucault introduced the concept of “biopolitics” to designate a new form of governing, one unique to modern political power. For him, “biopolitics” is “the endeavor, begun in the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems presented to governmental practice by the phenomena characteristic of a group of living human beings constituted as a population: health, birthrate, longevity, race . . .” (Foucault, Ethics 73). The “population,” as defined by these “biological features,” is a new entity, no longer a mere “collection of juridical subjects in an individual or collective relationship with a sovereign will” (Security 74). Man is now rendered as “a figure of population” (79), and beginning from the eighteenth century the government has increasingly taken as its goal the maximal development and fulfillment of various biological needs, leading to the present-day welfare society:

[P]opulation comes to appear above all else as the ultimate end of government. In contrast to sovereignty, government has as its purpose not the act of government itself, but the welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health, and so on; and the means the government uses to attain these ends are themselves all, in some sense, immanent to the population; it is the population itself on which government will act either directly, through large-scale campaigns, or indirectly, through techniques that will make possible, without the full awareness of the people, the stimulation of birth rates, the directing of the flow of population into certain regions or activities, and so on. The population now represents more the end of government than the power of the sovereign; the population is the subject of needs, of aspirations, but it is also the object in the hands of the government, aware, vis-à-vis the government, of what it wants, but ignorant of what is being done to it. (Power 216-17)
What is particularly noteworthy here is that, under this new form of government, there has been a pivotal change in the modern political structure: population now becomes simultaneously the object and subject of power. This alters the traditional relationship between the sovereign and the people who are his subjects, for the former can no longer stand “in a relation of singularity and externality, and thus of transcendence, to his principality” (204). What emerges instead is an immanent structure in which life and politics, or subject and power, interpenetrate.

Following this line of thinking, Giorgio Agamben adopts the term “biological modernity” (*Homo Sacer*) to pinpoint the nature of modern politics: “the entry of zoē [the mere biological fact of living] into the sphere of the polis—the politicization of bare life as such—constitutes the decisive event of modernity” (4). He sorts out the two main directions of Foucault’s research—“political techniques” (power) and “technologies of the self” (the subject). And, insofar as the modern biopolitical structure is characterized by the interpenetration of power and the subject, Agamben focuses his attention on what Foucault designates as the modern “‘political double bind,’ constituted by individualization and the simultaneous totalization of structures of modern power” (qtd. in Agamben, *Homo Sacer 5*). In other words, the two aspects, individualization and totalization, do not operate separately; instead, they enter a relationship in which they overlap or even coincide. Agamben then attempts to show why the two opposites come to converge and constitute a “zone of irreducible indistinction” in which “exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and zoē, right and fact” are bound up with each other (9).

Agamben’s analysis centers on the mechanism by which law reaches life *qua* the outside. He takes sovereignty or the sovereign decision as his point of reference: law grants the sovereign the power to suspend law itself by proclaiming a “state of exception.” The sovereign is thus located within law as its outside and conditions its validity because the sovereign decision also declares the applicability of law in ordinary situations (15-16). From this *modus operandi*, the relationship between sovereignty and law is derived:

*The rule applies to the exception in no longer applying, in withdrawing from it. . . . Here what is outside is included . . . by means of the suspension of the juridical order’s validity—by letting the juridical order, that is, withdraw from the exception and abandon it. The exception does not subtract itself from the rule; rather, the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule. The*
particular “force” of law consists in this capacity of law to maintain itself in relation to an exteriority. We shall give the name relation of exception to the extreme form of relation by which something is included solely through its exclusion. (18; emphasis in original)

In a word, to exist and operate, that is, to constitute itself as a whole and extend to external objects, law must create the instance of exception in order to “establish a relation with what is outside relation (the nonrelational). The relation of exception thus simply expresses the originary formal structure of the juridical relation” (19). Here Agamben touches upon the transcendental formal constitution of law; the separation of “constituent power” or “norm” from “constituted power” or “application” institutes the continuing effectiveness of law. The exception qua the “minimal form” of law exactly represents what Carl Schmitt calls the “founding power” of law insofar as, with this transcendental formal dimension, law will be always “in force” even when it is suspended in fact (Agamben, State 33-36)—this explains the title of Chapter 2 of Agamben’s State of Exception: “Force-of-Law.” Of course, it is Jacques Derrida who puts that arch-concept of Western metaphysics, “Being” itself, sous rapture or “under erasure” since this concept is always absent, yet somehow also present (as a sort of trace or residue) in its absence. Agamben’s project too is in some sense to end Western metaphysics; for Agamben, who has certain connections back to Walter Benjamin and of course, like Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, to the Jewish tradition, we might say a philosophical messianism replaces the Western institution of metaphysics.

By virtue of exception, then, law stands outside of itself and acquires an extended exceptional existence; therefore, exception (Ausnahme), the “taking of the outside,” can be regarded as the founding, “ecstatic” act of law by means of which the fundamental spacing of law is accomplished and reaches toward the nonrelational (Agamben, Homo Sacer 19; State 35). If the constitution of this “unlocalizable” exception of law guarantees its interminable power, then relatively life itself cannot end its present condition precisely because an exceptional form of life is now instituted. This topological structure accounts for Agamben’s symmetrical juxtaposition of the sovereign and “homo sacer.” The homo sacer is a criminal figure, one banished by archaic Roman law, expelled from the community and thus deprived of its juridical protection. Furthermore, the law stipulates that such a person can be “killed but not sacrificed”: the homo sacer is excommunicated from both the secular and the divine realms and thus stripped of all forms or qualities of life. This is a life reduced by the “sovereign ban” to the
state of pure living, so Agamben describes the “life of homo sacer” as “bare life” (Homo Sacer 8). Here, on the side of life, Agamben finds another instance of exception: an “inclusive exclusion (an exceptio) of zoē in the polis” (7). Most importantly, this exceptional form of life, the homo sacer, “presents the originary figure of life taken into the sovereign ban and preserves the memory of the originary exclusion through which the political dimension was first constituted” (83).

This means that two exceptions, that of law and that of life, converge and coincide in a zone of topological torsion, accounting for the unseverable double bind between life and law. Thus immediately there arises the question of the relationship between the sovereign and bare life. Is the place of the former identical to that of the latter? Or rather, is not the sovereign the counterpart of bare life now that the sovereign relates to law in the form of an externality while the sacred man is excommunicated precisely because he is totally within law? On the one hand, there is the entry of life into law, that is, the politicization of life; on the other, there is the entry of law into life, that is, the capitalist biologization of law. Agamben has alluded to the difference between “exception” and “example”: the former illustrates inclusive exclusion (not belonging to the set but included in it), and the latter, exclusive inclusion (belonging to the set but excluded from it) (Homo Sacer 21-22).\(^1\) In this light, it seems more justifiable to take bare life as the exemplary form of life under law in the sense that, once the subject is under the absolute sway of law, he is eccentric to himself.

In short, the question comes down to this: Is the sovereign “bare,” and, conversely, is life “sovereign”? This is not an easy question to answer, for it concerns not only the biopolitical coincidence between life and politics but also a singular inversion of this immanent structure. To begin with, if life and law are posited as being originally external to each other, then they would be by nature

\(^1\) One productive way to illustrate the difference between exception and example and to endow the latter with true subversive power is to resort to Jacques Lacan’s formulas of sexuation (see Lacan, Seminar, Book XX 79-80). Schematically, on the side of masculine subject, a limited, closed structure presupposes the existence of an exception, the primal father/Other. On the contrary, the nonexception of the exemplary feminine subject would produce an open infinite set since the external instance of limitation has been revoked; what we have then is a structure that is non-totalizable and a subject that is “not all.” While not explicitly pursuing this feminine logic, this essay centers around the concept of “not-all.” As a matter of fact, one core theme to be discussed later—the “singular inversion” from the “virtual” to the “real state of exception”—can be read as Agamben’s counterpart of the Lacanian feminine model: by assuming or realizing her exemplary state of nonexception, the subject subtracted from any additional leftover turns into the real remainder and renders the Other not-all.
distinct or mutually independent. In this case, we would have a binary structure in which life and law are engaged in perpetual opposition, the result being that law will not end and life will not change. In addition, the subject would not identify with law biologically or libidinally and, consequently, the modern biopolitical regime would not exist. Rather, the biopolitical double bind as constituted by exception should be conceived topologically, in the sense that we are not dealing with two different locations but with the structural constitution of one and the same object: exception is the topological invariant which defines the structure of modern human existence. If law and life are taken as two sides of a structure, they can be regarded as forming a Möbius strip: proceeding along the vector of life, we will at the end encounter at its heart law, and vice versa.

This “extimate” topological structure can be brought to bear on Agamben’s discussion of Alain Badiou’s four ontological categories. In set theory, belonging (∈) refers to the relationship between a set and its immediate elements, and inclusion (⊆) refers to the relationship between a set and its parts or subsets. Belonging, which Agamben’s English translator renders as “membership” (Homo Sacer 24), can be regarded as the most fundamental mode of existence of a multiple-entity—entities only exist as multiples—in a given situation, and inclusion can be regarded as a further restructuring of these multiples into a higher-level mode of existence. Badiou reformulates this mathematical distinction into an ontological one between presentation and representation: presentation pertains to the primary existence of things or beings whereas representation denotes a second-level presentation of the same beings in higher realms such as politics. Since an element of a set cannot be its subset at the same time, “belonging and inclusion, in the order of being-existent, are irreducibly disjunct” (Badiou, Being 84). Based on this noncoincidence, Badiou further distinguishes three modalities of being: “normality,” referring to the type of being that is “both presented and represented”; “excruciation,” referring to the type of being that is “represented but not presented”; and “singularity,” referring to the type of being that is “presented but not represented” (99). From his reading of Badiou, Agamben infers:

At first glance, one might think that it [exception] falls into the third case [singularity], that the exception, in other words, embodies a kind of membership without inclusion. . . . But what defines the character

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2 Badiou’s fourth ontological type is “the void,” adapted in this essay to denote the real rather than the formal truth of universal singularity: instead of positing the existence of any immanent-transcendental substance, the void converts any entity into a not-all multiple.
of the sovereign claim is precisely that it applies to the exception in no longer applying to it, that it includes what is outside itself. The sovereign exception is thus the figure in which singularity is represented as such, which is to say, insofar as it is unrepresentable. What cannot be included in any way is included in the form of exception. In Badiou’s scheme, the exception introduces a fourth figure, a threshold of indistinction between excrescence (representation without presentation) and singularity (presentation without representation), something like a paradoxical inclusion of membership itself. The exception is what cannot be included in the whole of which it is a member and cannot be a member of the whole in which it is always already included. (Homo Sacer 24-25; emphasis in original)

Here, however, Agamben appears to falter. It seems that the sovereign should go with the modality of excrescence because he is included as an outsider, while the homo sacer, exemplifying the abject, should go with that of singularity which, unlike particularity, characterizes a figure not recognized or represented as a part of the society. However, taken topologically, the sovereign exception and the abject exception should coincide in one place, the topological “zone” of indistinction. In this sense, Agamben is consistent. On the other hand, one might think he is too hasty in arriving at this “coincidence” of the sovereign and the homo sacer, for he may not have sufficiently considered both the historical context of the modern biopolitical regime and the subject’s part in the double bind.

Since the primary object of power is nothing other than life, Agamben makes it very clear that “the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power. In this sense, biopolitics is at least as old as the sovereign exception” (6; emphasis in original). And he also adds that “what characterizes modern politics is not so much the inclusion of zoë in the polis—which is, in itself, absolutely ancient—nor simply the fact that life as such becomes a principal object of the projections and calculations of State power. Instead the decisive fact is that . . . the realm of bare life—which is originally situated at the margins of the political order—gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, bios and zoë, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction” (9). We can understand that “modern politics is not characterized by the rise of biopower as such, but merely the coming to light of this ‘secret tie’ of sovereignty and biopower in bare life” (Mills 190). The question is
why or in what historical situation bare life—“originally situated at the margins of the political order”—and politics would coincide, and how this “secret tie” comes to light. Or, to shift the perspective slightly, what motive force produced in the eighteenth century by that twin entity, “political economy,” so grasps the subject that he deems the total political appropriation of the biological not just unoppressive but inherently congenial to him, making him passionately and “psychosomatically” attached to the biopolitical law? That is to say, the “secret tie,” against Mills’ intension, should rather account for the double, reciprocal bind between the subject and law.

In other words, the entry of life into politics alone cannot adequately explain the biopolitical regime or the coincidence between life and politics. What we see is just the unilateral extension of politics toward life; without the corresponding extension of life toward politics, the biopolitical double bind could not come into existence. Agamben, we may say, is not fully justified in using the words “biopolitical” and “biopolitics” in the claim that “the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power. In this sense, biopolitics is at least as old as the sovereign exception.” More appropriate terms would be “juridical” and “subjugation,” for here Agamben’s reference to sovereign power concerns the traditional external rule or domination instead of the modern complicity between the subject and power. For that matter, the “ politicization of life” thesis cannot fully explain the shared foundation or “contiguity between democracy and totalitarianism” (121). From this perspective, though Agamben’s identification of the biopolitical double bind circumscribes a pivotal realm for political action, his study, as Slavoj Žižek notes (Puppet 108), is susceptible to the charge of being a merely formal analysis on account of his evasion of the subject’s part. As a matter of fact, Agamben nearly touches on this point when further analyzing the said shared foundation:

It is almost as if, starting from a certain point, every decisive political event were double-sided: the spaces, the liberties, and the rights won by individuals in their conflicts with central powers always simultaneously prepared a tacit but increasing inscription of individuals’ lives within the state order, thus offering a new and more dreadful foundation for the very sovereign power from which they wanted to liberate themselves. “The ‘right’ to life,” writes Foucault, explaining the importance assumed by sex as a political issue, “to one’s own body, to health, to happiness, to the satisfaction of needs
and, beyond all the oppressions or ‘alienation,’ the ‘right’ to rediscover what one is and all that one can be, this ‘right’—which the classical juridical system was utterly incapable of comprehending—was the political response to all these new procedures of power” (La volonté, p. 191). The fact is that one and the same affirmation of bare life leads, in bourgeois democracy, to a primacy of the private over the public and of individual liberties over collective obligations and yet becomes, in totalitarian states, the decisive political criterion and the exemplary realm of sovereign decisions. (Homo Sacer 121-22)³

Agamben’s reference to Foucault’s History of Sexuality, Volume 1 (1976) is pivotal. If there Foucault used the term “right,” three years later, in The Birth of Biopolitics (1978-79), he substituted for it “interest” in his discussion of the difference between “the subject of right” and “the subject of interest”:

[T]he subject of right is, by definition, a subject who accepts negativity, who agrees to a self-renunciation and splits himself, as it were, to be, at one level, the possessor of a number of natural and immediate rights, and, at another level, someone who agrees to the principles of relinquishing them and who is thereby constituted as a different subject of right superimposed on the first. The dialectic or mechanism of the subject of right is characterized by the division of the subject, the existence of a transcendence of the second subject in relation to the first, and a relationship of negativity, renunciation, and limitation between them, and it is in this moment that law and the prohibition emerge. . . . [W]ith the subject of interest, as the economists [of the eighteenth century] make him function, there is a mechanism which is completely different from the dialectic of the

³ Agamben’s quotation is drawn from the French original of Foucault’s History of Sexuality, Volume 1: La volonté de savoir (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). It is in accordance with his theoretical edifice that Agamben leaves out what immediately follows here: “which did not derive, either, from the traditional right of sovereignty” (145; emphasis added). Foucault keeps insisting on the distinction between traditional sovereignty and modern biopolitics, whereas Agamben aims at the fundamental core of power that determines both regimes, or all juridical apparatuses throughout history. While sometimes criticizing and attempting to redress Agamben’s account, this essay mainly purports to deepen the effectiveness of his theory by enlisting psychoanalysis to approach the supplementary part of the subject.
subject of right, since it is an egoistic mechanism, a directly
multiplying mechanism without any transcendence in which the will
of each harmonizes spontaneously and as it were involuntarily with
the will and interest of others. We could not be more distant from the
dialectic of renunciation, transcendence, and the voluntary bond of
the juridical theory of the contract. The market and the contract
function in exactly opposite ways and we have in fact two
heterogeneous structures. . . . At the point of intersection, as it were,
of the empirical conception of the subject of interest and the analyses
of the economists, a subject can be defined who is a subject of
interest and whose action has a multiplying and beneficial value
through the intensification of interest, and it is this that characterizes
_homo economicus._ (Foucault, _Birth_ 274-76)

It is this _homo economicus_ that defines the biopolitical man and explains why
Foucault traces the birth of biopolitics to the eighteenth century: at that time,
liberalism brings into existence the “harmony,” indistinction, or even coincidence
between the singular (“the will of each”) and the universal (“the will and interest of
others”), that is, between life and capital. We can say that, in the biopolitical regime,
capital has become the “cosmopolitan” universal power that traverses all cultural
territorialities, while life itself has become the very singular substance which
accedes to the universal. In our contemporary era, for instance, DNA is the
molecular universal singularity, and capital, the truly living thing in itself. This
complicity or chiasmic exchange between the singular and the universal signals the
negative meaning of “ontological difference” as well as the “formal” meaning of
universal singularity. To wit, if universality proves to be a dead end, singularity
correspondingly cannot be the right choice.

In _Logics of Worlds_, Badiou uses the term “democratic materialism” to
designate his version of this double bind in which “there are only bodies and
languages” and in which the only materialism we are left with is “the materialism of
life,” a “bio-materialism” (2). Against this aporia, he proposes a “materialist
dialectic” and formulates a dictum for it: “There are only bodies and languages,
except that there are truths.” The third term, “truths,” is dialectical because it
introduces “the essence of difference” and “marks the gap between the two others,”
and it is materialist because truths do not add or synthesize but exist as “exceptions
to what there is” (4). But if truths do not add anything to the existent or constitute a
Kantian transcendental form, they cannot be taken merely as Badiou takes them,
that is, as post-evental positivities interpolated into the ontological structure or situation and not submitted to its law. Rather, if the event or the new is the condition of truths, what is the condition of the event if not the nonexistence or onelessness of law, that is, the ontological truth of any structured situation in which a being is placed? In other words, truths cannot be in the gap between two positive terms but can only be this very gap itself, which is nothing but the truth of the world itself. This “itself but nothing,” rather than “nothing but itself,” accounts for the only possible gloss for the “except that” in Badiou’s dictum because what is to be excepted is the world qua exception to itself. Here we have a second, truer meaning of ontological difference as well as the “real” meaning of universal singularity: there are only worlds of bodies and politics, except that these worlds do not exist “in themselves.” Still, the topological coincidence between singularity and universality is perhaps the only place for real acts, precisely because this place monadically contracts the double-bind structure, and because of the possibility that law can be bare and life can be sovereign; what is needed is an inversion.

**Singular Inversion and Universal Singularity**

Foucault uses one word to sum up the central motive force of population in the age of biopolitics: “desire” (Security 72). It is at this point that we see the core of the biopolitical aporia: it is not just the “politicization of life,” since this has always been the case throughout history, but the biologization of politics that constitutes the topological short circuit between law and life. Here, drawing on Žižek, we have a biopolitical “parallax”: on the plane of biopolitical immanence, the difference between the two opposite poles is not the difference between two positive entities but a “pure difference,” the “minimal difference which divides one and the same object from itself” (Parallax View 18). In a word, the very significance of a parallax structure does not reside in the noncoincidence or incompatibility between two correlates that are external to each other but in the “parallax gap” within each term; the gap that shows the “noncoincidence” of “the One” with itself (7) should be the very place of indistinction or coincidence. If power and life persist in each other’s core, they end at or with each other precisely because they are nothing but each other, they are the “parallax shift” of each other. Agamben illustrates this excessless truth of the two sides by resorting to the exceptional existence of law in Kafka. Kafka’s world, such as we find it in The Trial or The Castle, is all the more oppressive for the main character because law, being contentless, says nothing specific and is in total power due to its holding an
absolutely external relation to the subject. In the parable “Before the Law,” a man from the country waits before the door of the law until his death because the doorkeeper does not allow him to enter into the law even though the door is always open. At the last moment of his life, the man asks the doorkeeper why, for so many years, no man except himself has ever asked to enter this door. The guard replies, “No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it” (qtd. in Derrida 184). As Derrida explains,

one cannot reach the law, and in order to have a rapport of respect with it, one must not have a rapport with the law, one must interrupt the relation. . . . We must remain ignorant of who or what or where the law is, we must not know who it is or what it is, where and how it presents itself, whence it comes and whence it speaks. This is what must be before the must of the law. . . . Before the law, the man is a subject of the law in appearing before it. This is obvious, but since he is before it because he cannot enter it, he is also outside the law (an outlaw). He is neither under the law nor in the law. He is both a subject of the law and an outlaw. (203-04; emphasis in original)

In a word, this way of inclusion by exclusion keeps the man all the more in thralldom to the law (see Žižek, For They Know Not 109; Rolleston 72). And what holds the subject by not holding him is the very secret of the power of law:

And if this concerns the essence of the law, it is that the latter has no essence. It eludes this essence of being which would be presence. Its “truth” is this non-truth which Heidegger calls the truth of truth. As such, as truth without truth, it guards itself, it guards itself without doing so, guarded by a doorkeeper who guards nothing, the door remaining open—and open on nothing. Like truth, the law would be the guarding itself (Wahrheit), only the guarding. (Derrida 206; emphasis in original)

It is this guarding that establishes “some law which is not there but which exists” (205; emphasis in original). To put it succinctly, it is the purely “formal” gesture of positing or guarding law that presupposes or invokes the transcendental dimension beyond the content of law. Here we have the pure function of “framing” (213) which frames nothing but the frame itself: the door frames law into an exceptional,
surplus form which is then forever separated from the subject. 

Following in this vein and attempting a solution, Agamben juxtaposes Gershom Scholem’s and Benjamin’s interpretations of the “Nothing of Revelation” in Kafka’s world. What is involved in their debate concerns the status of the pure formal law which is “in force without significance.” In Scholem’s view, the empty law is still a law, still functioning: “Where the wealth of significance is gone and what appears... to the zero point of its own content, still does not disappear (and Revelation is something that appears), there the Nothing appears” (qtd. in Agamben, Homo Sacer 50-51). This “zero point” is what underpins the interminable state of “nonfulfillability” of law: “Its problem is not, dear Walter, its absence in a preanamistic world, but the fact that it cannot be fulfilled” (qtd. in Alter 107; emphasis in original). But Benjamin sees a “small, nonsensical hope” exactly where there is no difference between nonfulfillability and absence: “Whether the pupils have lost it [the Scripture] or whether they are unable to decipher it comes down to the same thing, because, without the key that belongs to it, the Scripture is not Scripture, but life. Life as it is lived in the village at the foot of the hill on which the castle is built. It is in the attempt to metamorphize life into Scripture that I perceive the meaning of ‘reversal’ [Umkehr], which so many of Kafka’s parables endeavor to bring about” (Benjamin, Correspondence 453). This messianic “reversal” is the only way of reading that “consists in rereading one’s own existence” in order to assist “those creatures for whom, in Kafka’s words, there is an infinite amount of hope” (453). It is through this “singular inversion” (Agamben, Homo Sacer 54) that Agamben interprets Benjamin’s “messianic nihilism that nullifies even the Nothing and lets no form of law remain in force beyond its own content” (53). In this inversion, law is terminated in being fulfilled; the formal, “virtual” state of law’s exception turns out to be nothing but the “real” state of exception: the absolute coincidence between singularity and universality. Agamben condenses his wager in this reversal or inversion:

We have seen the sense in which law begins to coincide with life once it has become the pure form of law, law’s mere being in force without significance. But insofar as law is maintained as pure form in a state of virtual exception, it lets bare life (K.’s life, or the life lived in the village at the foot of the castle) subsist before it. Law that becomes indistinguishable from life in a real state of exception is confronted by life that, in a symmetrical but inverse gesture, is entirely transformed into law. The absolute intelligibility of a life
wholly resolved into writing corresponds to the impenetrability of a writing that, having become indecipherable, now appears as life. Only at this point do the two terms distinguished and kept united by the relation of ban (bare life and the form of law) abolish each other and enter into a new dimension. (55)

That is to say, life that is completely inscribed by law is nothing but law, and law that completely comes into life is nothing but life, so that life and law cancel each other. From a certain perspective, this is what Benjamin means when he says that “I consider Kafka’s constant insistence on the Law to be the point where his work comes to a standstill” (Benjamin, Correspondence 453). This “dialectic at a standstill” induced by absolute coincidence pits the two sides against each other, face to face; this Benjaminian dialectical parallax should not be read as a mere juxtaposition or superimposition of two opposite sides—e.g., the past and present—which changes nothing essential. A critical move is needed; either a leap from the monadic standstill or “dialectical image” to the messianic cessation is necessary, or else the only criterion for judging a true “dialectical image” is whether it induces such a cessation. This move is not to be missed in understanding Benjamin and is one of Agamben’s significant contributions to Benjamin studies. This standstill brought about through the monadic structure of singular universality is the ultimate topological image of history in the sense that if the inside coincides with the outside, the inside is the outside precisely because there is neither inside (the infinitesimal irreducibility) nor outside (the all or whole): there is no Two but onelessness. In the

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4 The latter move seems much more in accord with Benjamin’s model. In one important passage on the distinction between simple remembrance and awakening, Benjamin also alludes to “dialectical reversal”: “There is a wholly unique experience of dialectic. The compelling—the drastic—experience, which refutes everything ‘gradual’ about becoming and shows all seeming ‘development’ to be dialectical reversal. . . . Awakening is namely the dialectical, Copernican turn of remembrance” (Benjamin, Arcades 389). This working of reversal also accounts for “the Copernican revolution in historical perception”: “what has been is to become the dialectical reversal—the flash of awakened consciousness” (388). In a word, simple remembering enacted as a “gradual” process also brings the past, “what has been,” into contact with the present, but this homogeneous continuum, though being a necessary process toward awakening, is not different from the unconscious world of dreaming. Dialectical awakening consists in grasping the truly significant signal and thereby absolves the oneiric continuum. Another way to understand this is to resort to psychoanalysis for a parallel situation of awakening, which might be ideal or theoretical: the patient’s whole (even conscious) life is determined by an unconscious structure of determination and thus is not different from dreaming; once he grasps the image through a gradual process of talking and remembering and utters the word qua the signifier of his desire, the unconscious determination and the symptom caused by it dissolve in an instant.
coincidence of law with itself, law is fully itself, that is, fulfilled, because law is not and is not restoratively sublated into a higher one-law, and vice versa in the case of life.

Here we have two stages of singular universality, just as there are two stages in the indistinction between life and law. In the first, formal or virtual stage, the coincidence signifies the mutual constitution of the exception of law and that of life: two positive irreducible One’s or two exceptions coincide. In the second, real or “material” stage, singular universality is nothing but singular universality in the sense that if the exceptional existence of law is ontologically supported by the exceptional substance of life, the subtraction of that exceptional excess would amount to the subtraction of the excess of law, that is, the subtraction of law itself.\(^5\) It is in this sense that life is law and nothing more because life is less than itself, and that law is life and nothing more because law is less than itself. The singular inversion consists in inverting lack as excess into excess as lack, and what emerges out of onelessness read as termination is lacklessness read as fulfillment.

It is here that Agamben’s conflation between excrescence and singularity proves to be topologically decisive and necessary. It is only within this monadic zone of indistinction that “the ways and forms of a new politics must be thought” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 187) by dint of no-exception: “This biopolitical body that is bare life must itself instead be transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a bios that is only its own zoē” (188). It is because forms of life are nothing but life that life qua content can be untied from the form. But what is most significant is that, if, in the first stage, the formal reading establishes the virtual monadic structure of coincidence, the second reflexive stage of mutual abolishment can only be brought about on the side of life by the subjective act of self-subtraction or one-subtraction—nothing is to be subtracted but this one. At this point, Foucault’s concept of “desire” as the very biopolitical motive force comes into focus. In Hélène Cixous’s reading, the man from the country in Kafka’s parable does not discern the fact that he has already been within the law or under its domination once he has desired to enter it (15). And to read Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari against

\(^5\) The relationship between the two stages can be conceived topologically as well as temporally. Since the singular inversion aims to arrive at the ontological truth of things, the real stage achieved by this inversion which happens in time is meant to turn the virtual stage reflexively back to its fundamental truth. That is to say, the real stage realizes in time the coincidence between the two topological sides of *de jure* and *de facto* or, more precisely, accomplishes the becoming-*de-facto* of *de jure*. 
themselves—where “one believed there was the law, there is in fact desire and desire alone” (49; emphasis in original).

In a word, the act of singular inversion has to be directed, à la Žižek, at the obscene core of law, “desire,” if the countryman is to learn that “not to attach oneself” to the deceptive images of law “is already to turn away from the essential” (Blanchot 29). And in terms of the direct link between biopower and body or satisfaction, “desire” and “the essential” should be read as the enjoying substance of life, namely the Lacanian jouissance, which acts as the ultimate immanent-transcendental anchor of the subject’s irreducible existence qua one. In other words, Foucault’s “subject of interest” is not the split subject of desire but the full monadic subject of jouissance, that is, the glory of the body which buttresses the exceptional identity of the subject and thereby the exceptional power of law. Though failing to account for this subjective act in Homo Sacer, Agamben has come very close to the same point when he tries to envisage a politics, which is precisely an ontopolitics, that pertains to “the most proper dimension of men” through the concept of sabbatical “unworking” (déseuvrement) which targets and would render inoperative “the mystery of economy” (Agamben, Le règne 16, 376). But when he identifies “Glory” (Gloire) as this “central arcanum of power” (15), he somewhat misses the point, for, regarding the dimension of the divine, men fantasize about the jouissance of the Other, attempting thereby to secure their bearing on the Other. Indeed, Agamben is so close to Lacan as to notice that, in Proposition 36 of Book 5 of Spinoza’s Ethics, glory is explained in terms of love: “the intellectual love of the mind for God is no other than the love with which God loves himself.” Spinoza’s corollary is even more illuminating: “in consequence, the love of the mind for God is not different from the love of God for men” (see Agamben, Le règne 371). That is, once the Other’s jouissance has been imagined or recognized, identification is secured. In brief, the “indissoluble link” between glory and oikonomia/government (15), which accounts for the theological dimension of power, is the knot that binds the subject’s enjoyment to law.7

Subtractive Unworking and the Properly Human

Again, everything hinges on the meaning of universal singularity: if the irreducible singularity of the bodily glory is not the universal singularity we search

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6 In this essay, all translations of Agamben’s Le règne et la gloire, Homo sacer 2-2 are mine.
7 However, soon after bringing in Spinoza, Agamben arrives at the true glory of man: “unworking and glory are, in fact, the same thing” (Le règne 372).
for, what can it be? We have seen that Badiou defines singularity as being presented, since it exists, but not represented, because it embodies the part that is not allowed a part to play in the situation, an Althusserian “weakest link” in the all: “Such a term [singularity] would continue to belong to the situation—its lack of re-presentation does not itself deprive it of existence—but as a fundamental anomaly, as something or someone strangely out of place” (Hallward 99). Now, for this singularity to accede to the status of universality, the “out-of-place” place should come to be the place for all. On the one hand, as has been shown, it is precisely this place of no-place that defines the topological zone of indistinction between life and law. However, to attain to the level of real or “true” universal singularity, the no-place must be tautologically and reflexively “non-placed” precisely because every place is not or is oneless: what is without a place is not relegated to some truer place; instead, the ontological truth of every place is its non-being. Again, to allude to and modify Badiou, if the place of truth adds nothing to the world, this universal out-of-place should exactly coincide with the place of the all itself and render the all as not-all by introducing a minimal self-difference into the all or every One. Subtraction is easily misunderstood if this self-difference is not considered. For example:

[S]ubtraction starts from the Void, from the reduction (“subtraction”) of all determinate content, and then tries to establish a minimal difference between this Void and an element that functions as its stand-in. . . . [T]hey, the excluded, those with no fixed place within the social edifice, presented themselves as the representatives, the stands-in, for the Whole of Society, for the true Universality (“we—the ‘nothing,’ not counted in the order—are the people, we are All against others who stand only for their particular privileged interest”). In short, political conflict designates the tension between the structured social body, in which each part has its place, and “the part with no-part” that unsettles this order for the sake of the empty principle of universality. . . . (Žižek, Puppet 64)

This is one aspect of universal singularity: the universal place which cannot be taken is embodied or represented by the singular which cannot take a place or remains out of place (65). The risk is that we might posit a self-sufficient, positive political subject-group which, as a “subaltern” unrepresented group, signifies singularity and has the absolute claim to the social whole. However, if we
conceptualize universal singularity as the not-all (the noncoincidence of every entity with itself), that is, if we take subtraction as an internal act which cuts through the subject’s being, the gap between every element and its set should be read in this way:

[T]he minimal difference which we encounter in the logic of subtraction is not the difference between two parts, but the difference between two aspects of . . . one and the same entity; it is the difference of an entity with itself. (Žižek, Puppet 80)

To model on Badiou, we may say that there are only particularities except that there are universal singularities, which should be taken not as another name for the irreducible substance but as the onelessness of every particularity, the only true exception which excepts the exceptionalized. The part as no-part is not a new added part but the no-part of every part, the partiality of every part, the not-all of every whole. If we overlook this self-loss qua one-loss, the pitfall of postmodern multiplicity might ensue. What the latter model lets slip is the particular, which is left unquestioned apropos of its identity and is merely replaced with self-sufficient, “singular” multiplicities (see Žižek, Parallax View 9-10, 34). It is at this point that Žižek and Agamben should concur. In defining the Christian identity, Žižek takes its universality as the cut that runs “across the entire social body, splitting, dividing from within every substantial ethnic, etc., identity” (35). The non-Christians are all existent communities or subjects, whereas the universal Christian is the cut, the noncoincidence, that splits Jews from themselves, Greeks from themselves, etc.: it is “the difference Christians/non-Christians itself which, as a [self]-difference, is universal” (35). In the same manner, Agamben defines the true Jew as a “remnant, as not-all” (Time 55), that is, as the remnant to every identity. If the original division established by law sets up the antagonistic groups of Jews and non-Jews, Saint Paul introduces the second division, “flesh/breath,” which “divides the [original] division” from within (49). Thus, among Jews, there are some who are not truly Jews because they have submitted to the law of flesh, just as among non-Jews there are some who follow the law of breath qua true life and are thus “not non-Jews.” Agamben designates this remnant within the Jewish as well as the non-Jewish groups as “the non-non-Jew” and illustrates this universal cut in the following figure (51):
In this formulation, the true Jew, or the true Christian in Žižek, is the real universal singularity or the messianic cut: “all that is left is a remnant and the impossibility of the Jew or the Greek to coincide with himself. The messianic vocation separates every klēsis [vocation] from itself, engendering a tension within itself, without ever providing it with some other identity; hence Jew as non-Jew, Greek as non-Greek” (Agamben, *Time 53*). The point is that this “non-non-Jew” is not a positive figure or identity; it is oneless and no more, the effect of the messianic cut which is the only act capable of inducing true—rather than a formal—singular inversion. And we can say that, at least in *The Time That Remains*, Agamben arrives at a theory of the subject very close to that harbored by psychoanalysis, which engages itself in formulating acts through which the subject may terminate the law of *jouissance*, the very biopolitical law that mortifies life with pseudo-living substance. Freud’s dictum “Wo es war, soll Ich werden” (“Where it was, I shall be”) means to come to the place which divides me from myself. In exact contrast to the Kantian Copernican revolution which introduces the transcendental dimension as the one that can accommodate conflicting sides, the Freudian revolution consists in inverting this “one” turn into a “oneless” singular reflexive return to be carried out by and on the subject: this is the true meaning of the unconscious which puts the subject face to face with his non-being, the ultimate empty core of being. The splitting of the subject, the *Spaltung*, does not mean that the subject is divided into two: consciousness and the unconscious, or being (life) and thinking (law). To arrive at this split via the psychoanalytic act, the subject has to confront the fact that “either I am not thinking or I am not” (Lacan, *Seminar, Book XVII* 103). As Lacan emphasizes, this formula cannot be converted into “I am thinking where I am not; I am where I do not think.” That is to say, the subject is not “in both places,” not split into two; the two is just a “mask” to conceal the splitting itself (103). Ultimately, the split is nothing but the split. The illusive choice between two veils the fact that the subject first chooses non-being. He cannot choose life (the psychotic, impossible real) because no choice is possible there. Choice appears only when he

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has chosen the side of law (the symbolic); the two terms of the choice come only as an aftereffect.

That is to say, the subject does not choose between life and law; he first chooses law (without being) and then chooses between life and law, for the condition of choice or the constitution of the subject has already made the psychotic identity (pure being) impossible. Or rather, in every choice, whether he chooses thinking or being, the subject is not: “man was deluding himself in believing he was in [some] common axis, which is nowhere. At least until Freud made this discovery. For if what Freud discovered isn’t precisely that, it is nothing” (Lacan, Écrits 431). And it is this “nowhere” that accounts for the fact that “the subject partakes of the real precisely in that it is impossible” (Seminar, Book XVII 103). The act of subtraction consists in cutting into each choice by bringing out the minimal difference or onelessness in it: in “I do not think,” the “not” cuts through thinking; in “I am not,” the cut runs through being. Here we may take this non-non-subject as Lacan’s version for the non-non-Jew: the subject cuts into each identity and reveals it as not-all in itself by virtue of subtracting the substantial ontological ground from the subject himself: there is no one-exception to being except that law is not one. Here we can also venture to read the following aphorism of Lacan as a compellingly fitting interpretation of biopolitics: “There can be no fort without da,” but “there is no Dasein with the fort” (Four Fundamental Concepts 239). There is no life (fort) without law (da), except that biopolitics (Dasein) is not (without fort). What we have here is loss on both sides of life and law precisely because the One is not.

To best formulate this ontopolitical act, we can draw on the well-known dictum in The Diamond Sutra: “In not dwelling in any place, the heart comes to be.” Again, the point is that this “not any place” is not a place but the nonidentity of any place: the void is not a thing but the no-thing or not-one of everything. And the act through which the heart/subject comes to the no-place of any place is this cut, the power of the void-diamond. In coming to this void, the subject effectuates the ontological truth of every being and unbinds or suspends the working of law. Following Proposition 52 of Book 4 in Spinoza’s Ethics, Agamben defines this act of suspension through “interior” contemplation as the “proper power of action” which renders life “unproductive in all its operations”; in the same vein, “subjectivity is what works itself as a central unworking in every operation” (Le règne 373). What is this “interior” act of unworking if not the cut within, the cut that accounts for “the subject, this ‘inwardly circumcised Jew,’” to borrow the title of Chapter 1 of Žižek’s The Parallax View? If the subject can “deactivate” the
working of law, it is only in virtue of coming to this exceptionless place, i.e., the void, which Badiou defines as “neither presented nor represented” (Being 108)—that is to say, neither life (the merely present) nor law (the formal structure). Thus, if we characterize universal singularity in accord with this reflexive self-subtraction, this double entity reverses into onelessness. What is truly in excess is the absolute coincidence between any entity and its nonidentity—the void as universal singularity running through all sets or all multiples. It is in this sense that nothing is added but this void, meaning that nothing, including “the” nothing, really is in the world. For the world is not, and ultimately, the not of the world, the void, is not.

It is owing to the subject’s un-binding of himself from the internal “spectral” excrescence that “we drop reference to Otherness altogether” (Žižek, Puppet 141). In other words, what remains is not I as the exception but I as excessless ipseity, a partial non-being in the sense of nonrelation to Being. To put it otherwise, the thing that is in me more than me turns out to be less than me because I am less than myself, divested of the thing that haunts me. Unbinding comes down to subtracting me qua surplus exception and identifying with the less-than-excess not-all. In other words, through internal self-subtraction, I am oneless, voided of me. This act cuts into life and politics, renders them incomplete in themselves, making it possible to think “ontology and politics beyond every figure of relation” (Agamben, Homo Sacer 47) and to think “the ontological difference no longer as a relation, and Being and being beyond every form of a connection” (61). The biopolitical double bind indeed petrifies not just life but law; they are both victimized. Their non-relation implies that, in becoming oneless or not-all, both life and law, once disconnected from each other, would be liberated: law would no longer be “bare law,” namely, the law of flesh that operates by sin and mortifies life; and life would no longer be “bare life,” namely, life that is reduced to mere biological existence and corporalizes law.

What we finally arrive at then is an exceptionless understanding of life, which might point toward a way to reconceptualize life beyond the biopolitical double bind: life, in this new light, may finally elucidate what Agamben calls “the inoperative center of the human,” which has long been taken under the name of “eternal life” (Le règne 374). Life then would be life and nothing more: by way of life’s coincidence with itself via self-noncoincidence, the formal “I am that I am” would be singularly inverted: so, you are what you are and nothing more. At this level, nothing is to be said and nothing is to be done, since “unworking” consists in “deactivating practices that are linguistic and corporeal, material and immaterial”
(374). What is needed is unsaying the said and undoing the done; adding anything is tantamount to establishing a form for the void, \(\{\emptyset\}\)—in Buddhism, this amounts to substantializing the void, that is, setting a head on top of the beheaded. Through this self-cessation, “something like the experience of the ‘proper’ and the ‘self’ (soi) becomes possible,” and life “lives only its own vivability (vivabilité)”: “In this unworking, the life which we live is only the life by which we live, is only our power of acting and living (vivre), our act-ivity and viv-ability. Bios here coincides without remainder with zoe” (373-74). As it lives, so it lives, except that and on account of the fact that nothing really is. Life is, except that life is not and is not because not is not: this might be the answer to living in the true, for here nothing is added to life and the world. And the truly vital or human dimension has to be conceived in accordance with the “except that.”

When law is not—when its oneness, imputed by subjective supposition or interpellative subjectification, is subtracted from it—it becomes the domain for action, thus opening up the proper dimension of the ethical, from which the biopolitical exception, i.e., law, is subtracted. According to Agamben, the properly human “praxis” does not pertain to mere activity but to deactivation, which institutes, in every form of human conduct, not the excessive but the not-all, not one more action but suspension:

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8 In Zen Buddhism—which is, however, quite heterogeneous and, more often than not, restores the One-I—an enlightened master that is cut in his being by “nothing” does nothing unusual. He eats when he is hungry, drinks when thirsty, and sleeps when drowsy—ordinary people, in contrast, do not really eat, drink, or sleep when eating, drinking, and sleeping. The enlightened master aims at disconcerting his disciples and cutting the ground from under their self-certainly. For example, one master asks his followers, “If all dharmas go to the one, where does the one go?” There is no answer—definitely, first of all, not nothing or void—except for no-one answer; therefore, one master replies, “I had a gown made in Chingzhou, weighing seven catties.” For another example, to the question “what is Buddha-nature,” a master replies “dried-shit fern,” thereby fully demonstrating the Žižekian-Hegelian “infinite judgment” that arrives at “the speculative identity of the highest and the lowest, like the formula of phrenology ‘the Spirit is a bone’” (Žižek, Parallax View 5). Furthermore, the oneless Zen master is utterly inhuman; he is usually characterized as violating or disregarding all habitual human behaviors and emotions. Actually, he perfectly embodies the “inhuman” defined by Žižek, in one aspect, as the dimension of the “subject subtracted from all forms of human ‘individuality’ or ‘personality’” (In Defense 166) and, in another, as showing total “rejection of habit” (171). Žižek characterizes the second trait as defining positive revolutionary terror, and terror is exactly the very affect aroused in Zen disciples when facing their master, for nothing is more terrifying than having to confront the chasm of nothing opened up by him; the radical step toward enlightenment is usually formulated as being like jumping off a cliff, which signifies the last possible reason for humans to posit and secure a ground for one(self).
We see then the essential function which the tradition of Western philosophy has assigned to contemplative life and to unworking: the properly human praxis is a sabbatism which, in rendering inoperative the specific functions of the living, opens them to possibilities. Contemplation and unworking are, in this sense, the metaphysical operators of the anthropogenetic which, in liberating the living man from his biological and social destiny, summon him to that indefinable dimension which we are used to calling political. (Le règne 374)

Politics then is human conduct, except that human conduct is born of and aims at the not-all. Every political action requires subjectification. Foucault’s distinction between “the subject of right” and “the subject of interest” reveals that subjectification is produced in a mechanism of exchange which demands sacrifice and renunciation, i.e., the splitting of the subject. In short, an instance of transcendence instituted by loss through self-renunciation is the necessary condition of subjectification. However, in the biopolitical regime, the subject of interest is indifferent to loss and thus to transcendence: “What defines the apparatuses that we have to deal with in the current phase of capitalism is that they no longer act as much through the production of a subject, as through the process of what can be called desubjectification” (Agamben, What 22). This obviously accounts for the birth of “inert” social bodies and “the eclipse of politics, which used to presuppose the existence of subjects and real identities (the workers’ movement, the bourgeoisie, etc.)” (22). This is necessarily the outcome of multiplication and excessive socio-neuronal innervations. The premature death of so many social and political movements testifies to the fact that social and psychic energies are excessively distributed and consumed in multiplying networks: biopolitical social mechanisms “do not give rise to the recomposition of a new subject, except in larval or, as it were, spectral form” (21). However, as this essay has been insisting, we can no longer resort to transcendence (or subjectification) or to desubjectification, the latter being an operation or effect of biopower. Any theory readily subscribing to desubjectification or to the death of the subject is liable to be complicit with biocapitalism. The potential of the parallax theory of singular inversion and self-subtraction rests in recognizing this dilemma and in seeing that the properly human dimension is “beyond or before the human, the central threshold through which pass currents of the human and the inhuman, subjectification and desubjectification, the living being’s becoming speaking and the logo’s becoming
living” (Agamben, Remnants 135). The inhuman, the human remnant, or the non-non-Jew, if not the transhuman defined as “more” human than the human, can be regarded as different names for this unnamable dimension of the “except that.” This “except that” cannot be taken as the third term because it is just the not-all for all, the nonidentity of each identity. Nor should it be understood as a liminal in-between figure which does nothing more than posit an external distance between two all-entities:

The human being can survive the human being, the human being is what remains after the destruction of the human being, not because somewhere there is a human essence to be destroyed or saved, but because the place of the human is divided, because the human being exists in the fracture between the living and the speaking being, the inhuman and the human. That is: the human being exists in the human being’s non-place, in the missing articulation between the living being and logos. The human being is the being that is lacking to itself and that consists solely in this lack and in the errancy it opens. (134; emphasis in original)

“A term is unnamable only in so far as it is the unique term that subtracts itself from that uniqueness” (Badiou, Theoretical Writings 111); that is, through subtraction, the thing takes itself away from itself and takes leave of itself. Thus, instead of subjectification or desubjectification, the proper subjective act of this in-operation should be a-subjectification in the Lacanian sense that the a is taken as the remnant of the all and reduces every A, every univocal other/Other, to a not-all a. And the “errancy” induced by the asubjectification of every being, and ultimately of me myself, may just be the errancy of being and politics: they move out of themselves not because there are multiplicities and multiplicities, but because there are multiplicities except that they are not, not all, not at all.

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