Governance, Sovereignty and Profane Hope in a Globalised Catastrophe-World

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The meaning shift that Walter Benjamin almost imperceptibly brought about in 1925 on the Schmittian categories of sovereignty (*Souveränität*), decision (*Entscheiding*) and of state of exception (*Ausnahmezustand*) in his work on the *Trauerspiel*, the German baroque drama (Benjamin 1978a: 245–251) has already been the subject of much commentary.[1] Whereas in Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology* of 1922, ''he is sovereign who decides over the state of exception'' (*Souverän ist wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet*), Benjamin asserts that the function of baroque sovereignty (*barocke Souveränität*), given that in Benjamin's thought the baroque world reflects a dimension of *catastrophe* (*Katastrophe*), that is, the despair of creatures in the face of the abyss opened up by the dramatic rupture of tradition, the retreat of transcendence and the absence of horizon, consists rather of forestalling and avoiding, (*auszuschliessen*), the state of exception, and this with the aim of restoring a certain order. However, Benjamin adds, widening even more the gap separating him from Schmitt at the very moment when, with admiration, he discovered the latter's notion of sovereignty, this same sovereign individual is incapable (*unfähig*) of fulfilling his role. Benjamin thereby introduces an antithesis (*Antithese*) between the function of the sovereign (*Herrschvermögen*) and his power (*Herrschermacht*) which is constituent of baroque sovereignty. This latter is hence characterised by the figure of a prince (*Fürst*) who is rendered both fragile and impotent, in a context where the Hippocratic or teleological meaning of crisis as a purely transitory and surmountable phase has yielded place to an ontological concept of crisis as a permanent condition, as catastrophe, as a fusion of the rule and the exception – as will be reflected fifteen years later, in 1940, in the famous Thesis 8 of his *Theses* entitled ''On the concept of history'' (Benjamin 1978b: 697).

Now if in 1940 Benjamin transposed to the *Thesen* the trial categories relating to the *Trauerspiel* (those of *permanent exceptionality* or of *exceptionality indiscernible from the rule* in Thesis 8 and that of *Katastrophe* in Thesis 9), in such a way as to introduce into the contemporary political crisis marked by the triumph of Fascism terms belonging to the analysis of the 17th century baroque drama, this was not to have us believe that our fragile baroque prince, as a victim

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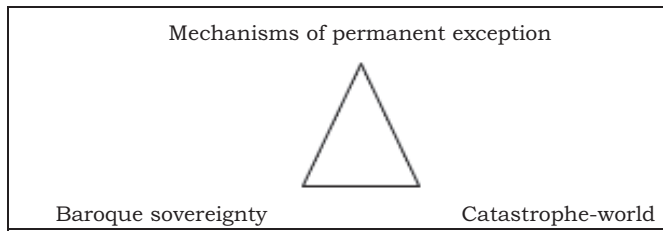C1428ATE, Argentina
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Figure 1. Baroque triangle.

of permanent intrigue, was embodied in the powerful apparatus of Fascism, but rather to suggest that European social-democracy had been Fascism's antechamber, and that it had shown itself incapable of avoiding it. That which weighs the creature-prince down is the political power that provided a vestibule for Fascism, and not Fascism as such: this latter appears rather as the crude apparatus of permanent exceptionality. As a result, we can derive here a triangle showing the linkage between *baroque sovereignty*, the *catastrophe-world* and the apparatus of *permanent exception*.

The question we wish to pose in this brief article is to ask if this idealised triangle, which we will refer to as the ''baroque triangle'', will allow us to characterise and even to make diagnosis of our own currrent condition, marked by fragilised sovereignties, by global-intensive governance apparatuses and by a horizon-less catastrophe-world in which, paradoxically, the *vision* of the world diminishes in proportion as its technological visibility becomes ever greater through the simultaneous and instantaneous availability of images. Granted, world governance and its inten-sive processes have little in common with Fascism. The latter proceeds, in the first instance, from authoritarian nationalisms and from the personal and unconditional power of a charismatic leader. So, if, on the one hand, within the schema of Benjamin's Thesis 8, Fascism is the apparatus of exception that substitutes for baroque sovereignty and which is characterised by the transforma-tion of the exception to the rule, on the other hand, in our globalised world, the limited and fragile sovereignties of national states have not in fact been replaced by a new form of sovereignty on the global scale, in the style of an all-powerful *Imperium*. They are rather obliged to cohabit with the impersonal mechanisms of global governance, which limit them and render them fragile but do not destroy nor replace them, though nevertheless diminishing asymptotically the basis of their power. In our current context, marked both by the permanence of crises and by the inability of sovereignties to ward them off, it is the fragile co-existence between sovereignty and the mechan-isms of governance which stands out most prominently in the political dimension. These govern-ance mechanisms do not substitute for sovereignty, as could on the contrary be construed from certain texts of Foucault (2004: 91–119) that emphasised the centrality that the control of popula-tions is acquiring to the detriment of the dimension of ''peoples''. But on the other hand, sover-eignty does not enjoy the complete monopoly of governance, as is the thesis of those radical critiques of the modern state which reduce sovereignty to the administrative machinery of the state without seeing the widening gaps between sovereignty itself and the associated bureaucratic apparatuses. But the crises do not only relate to the economic sphere. They extend to cover a gen-eral threat directed in a both asymptotic and permanent form against the whole of modern society. To this type belong not only the ''run-away'' tendencies of financial markets, but also phenomena as diverse as ''global terrorism'', climate change or indeed epidemics on a global scale: a range of threats which come to be felt in intermittent fashion and which spread in successive waves,

reflecting thus, precisely in this aspect of sequential progression, the scenario of Alfred Hitchcock's famous film *The Birds* (Cohen 2007). The baroque triangle of contemporary globalisation would consequently be marked by national sovereignties in crisis, by the catastrophe-world and by the apparatuses of governance: far from simply substituting for sovereignty, these elements cohabit with it, colonising it by taking advantage of its administrative and internal security mechanisms while at the same time taking little heed of national boundaries:
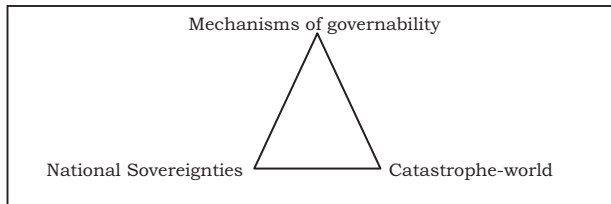

Figure 2. Baroque triangle of contemporary globalisation.

One of the typical characteristics of this triangularity is the tension distilled by Agamben (2003b) between the *form of law* (*forma-di-legge*) and the *force of law* (*forza-di-legge*), which this Italian philosopher prints struck-through, as above, to point up the gulf that exists between the effective exercise of governance processes derived from clauses of exceptionality and urgency, and forms of legitimacy emanating from law *(forma-di-legge)*. If we describe this tension according to the terms of our triangle, we can assert that global governance mechanisms are effective while yet being devoid of the legitimacy that accompanies the rule of law.

Agamben, it is true, analyses this tension in the context of the exceptional clauses inscribed in the constitutions of nation-states. Yet it is not necessary to appeal to circumstances such as a *state of siege* or the resort to *decrees of urgency* to detect in the exercise of governance this separation between the ''forma-di-legge'' and the ''forza-di-legge''. The international financial organisations, the international credit-rating agencies, the markets themselves have become processes of governance that dictate their will to nation-states without being constrained by the slightest mechanism of legitimacy, such that the very principle of a ''democratically controlled globalisation'' or of a ''globally tamed capitalism'' seems almost like a squaring of the circle.

If we limit ourselves only to the economic and political aspects, the very idea of a democratically controlled globalisation would need in fact to satisfy, as Reyes Mate (2001) pointed out, three principles which can only with difficulty be reconciled: maintaining economic competitiveness on the global market, not sacrificing the level of social well-being and ensuring compatibility with the rule of law. In other words, it is a question of combining economic competitiveness, social cohesion and civil and political liberties. It is clear that the balance between these three factors is always ruptured in the area of the two weaker links, those relating to social well-being and the rule of law. Economic competitiveness ends up subordinating social cohesion and individual and political freedoms. We can observe this phenomenon in the docility with which parliaments have been transformed into organs of executive power when it is a matter of the choice of economic adjustment policies, bringing about an inversion of power between the legislature and the executive which Agamben (2003b) describes as typical of a tendency that is now deep-rooted in contemporary political societies.

Having said that, we might consider whether there may be a possible way to reformulate the political dimension which could break the spell of the baroque triangle. The statement that ''previously we wanted to change the world, now we are happy simply to change our country'' (Kirchner 2007) seems like a denial of reality in the contemporary context of increasing globalisation where global interdependence, on whatever scale it is considered, prevents the situation of one country being isolated from the rest of the world. But at the same time, this comment of Cristina Kirchner's is symptomatic of a post-historic codification of our contemporary condition in which any radical transformation of the world is assimilated to a utopia which outstrips the range of the political grammar embedded in the discourses that today convey political ideas. This leads us to treat the question of hope, of utopia and of the political within a framework traversed by the ''post-historic''. To this effect we need to bring out the figures or *tropes* (White 1973) which give shape to political hope once the theodicies of history have fallen away.

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Hope, temporal, finite and concrete, is an *existential* (*existenzial*), if we may borrow Heidegger's expression (2006: 12–12). We can set if off as much against the extra-cosmic theodicies as their secularised versions defined by the philosophies of progress. Hope as an affective modality of our finitude is a disposition of our condition in the world. It is inherent in the horizon of collective action and links together the dialectic between organic death, which is the natural destiny of each individual, with the *vita activa*, that is the *concerted action* which is the expression *par excellence* of the political (Arendt 1958). Hope is a political affect of our finite mode. It stands in opposition to fear, to indifference and to inward withdrawal which are characteristics of political disaffection, expressed in the shape of a return to the sense of fatality of myth and destiny which comes to us by way of the gods, the cycle of nature or the reification of social life. From this point of view, hope is not the eschatological waiting for a becoming, but the most radical expression of our ontology of the present (Foucault 2001). We understand our present and contingent being, inseparable from its horizon, as being-with-others-in-the-world, as *bearer* of the political. That links it with hope, conceived by Bloch (1959) as the opening of the political horizon of acting in common.

　　''For those who despaired the only thing given us was hope''[2] wrote Walter Benjamin at the end of his essay on the ''elective affinities'' of Goethe (2000: 395). Hope is not, like the philosophy of progress, a vector of optimism immunised against the randomness of finitude and contingence. It is to the contrary ''the organisation of pessimism'', to borrow Benjamin's characterisation (1978b). Hope is thus a fissure riven in each instant of time, through which penetrates that tragic aspect of the human that is action, less as theodicy than as actualisation (*Aktualisierung*), as encounter with the ruins of the past which suspends the continuum of time and opens it up to the political. Profane hope is thus the bearer of a *utopia* which is born of the suspension of the present (*Jetztzeit*), thus liberated from the shackles of the continuum of time. But what is thus able to open up time to the tragic if not that excess of aspiration borne by the idea of justice? If we retain the dreams of justice that come down to us from the past and which prevent us from conceiving the given as a fixed and immutable world, we then can understand that the past is not dead, and that it is not even past (Faulkner 1960). The hermeneutic circle which results from this will allow us to reach understanding not only with our contemporaries, through the polyphony of dialogue, but also with past and future generations, through the

actualisation of the political which reactivates the charge of our historical responsibility through the dimension of justice.

The opposite of this figure is *estrangement, alienation* (*Entfremdung*). It describes on the one hand how the contemporary world is becoming more and more opaque and closed despite its hyper-visibility and the marginal opportunities for individual action that it allows. On the other hand it shows how the non-accomplished pasts, that is, the uncompleted projects of humanity, fade into a halo of the forgotten, making us more and more indifferent to the dreams of justice: historical time remains thus enveloped in fatality through the account of what is appearing henceforth as a single and mythological destiny. This has the effect of distancing us from the horizon of understanding, makes us strangers to one another, undoes the historical solidarity between the generations, and casts us into a temporality which is no longer anything but an unintelligible environment and in which we find ourselves in isolation, even at a time when we are most densely dependent on others. We are enlisted despite ourselves in an accelerated headlong flight, alienated within the seriality of things.

The present circumstances of intensively and extensively globalised capitalism have long since been characterised by two dimensions which contradict the horizon of profane hope which we have evoked in existential terms. On the one hand, global capitalism has exacerbated the mechanisms of the fetishisation of merchandise described by Marx and further elaborated by Lukács. Such a fetishisation renders the item of merchandise at once worshipped and evanescent: as soon as it becomes possessed, it declines in appreciation and the love that it excited is diverted from it on to another object now more greatly favoured, and so on in an unending series. This is an actualised version of the barrel of the Danaids, the alienated, vain and cruel task imposed by the mythological Avernus, which generates no meaning but rather an accelerated and ever-repeated onward rush without any apparent endpoint from which all hope of satisfaction is excluded. Possession, in capitalist terms, is incapable of generating the slightest sense because its structure coincides with the serial and ever accelerated onrush proper to mechanisms of enchantment, with a desire that is constantly unsatisfied and in thrall to the inexhaustible caprice of fashion and the dazzling novelty of the market. This mechanism is not limited only to the economic sphere but takes in, as Benjamin shows in his *Passagen-Werk* (*Arcades Project*) (1982)[3], the whole set of modern forms of life in terms of an *expression* (*Ausdruck*) of fetishism (1982: 45-59, 495-496).

The second dimension of the contemporary position derives from the fact that the profane, revolutionary-based hope particular to the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, with all its utopian facets and historic failures, has passed into a space of oblivion and incomprehension that renders it progressively more distant and unintelligible for younger generations, despite the continuing intermittent celebration of certain rituals and the melancholy of maintained festivities and anniversaries. The utopias aspired to have been buried along with the ideologies of progress, lumped together by the now defunct belief that capitalist economic and industrial progress would usher in social and political progress in at least equal measure. But the historic catastrophes of the 20th century and the discredit and ultimate dismal failure of ''true socialism'' have finally relegated to the gloomy cellars of historical memory the utopian aspirations and revolutionary hopes of the previous generations.

The domain of the political appears henceforth in the globalised world as a simple process of population administration and of governance of the capitalist economy. It is already long established that governments and oppositions in consolidated democracies are effectively indistinguishable, with both assuming the same premises of *governmentality* (Foucault 2004: 91–119). Politicians contend in striving to propose optimal conditions of adaptation to the globally

intensive structure of capitalism: left-leaning parties seek to palliate the marginal effects and scandalous externalities of the system while right-leaning ones work to accelerate the rhythm of capitalist intensification, cynically claimed as being the revolutionary engine of history. Paradoxically, but significantly, the right is appropriating the lexis of revolution and relegating to the left the conservative slot of the *passé*.

In such conditions, it could seem that hope can have no other destiny than to be dismissed entirely from the sphere of the profane and limited to religions offering an idea of salvation. The well-known phenomena of religious fundamentalism have in common a transcendent theodicy, that is, the relegation of the meaning of the world to the kingdom of heaven. Salvation beyond this earth is a utopia that does not arise out of praxis. Neither does it show any proof of an understanding of our being in the world as ζῷον πολιτικόν, political creatures. From this point of view, the political form that the theodicy takes is that of the return of *theocracy* as *tutelary hope*, both absolutist and abstract, since it does not proceed out of the hermeneutic relativity of praxis and consequently rejects the irreducible plurality of the political. For an era which has ''eaten from the tree of knowledge'', as Max Weber (1968: 154) points out on the other hand, we must understand that the meaning of the world is henceforth contingent and relative, unable to appeal for justification to any absolute truth, be it scientific or metaphysical. When religion seeks to become something other than a cultural particularity and to extend beyond the relative position assigned it within a secular culture, when it thus tries to return to an absolute norm of truth, it can do so only at the price of the negation of all plurality and of seeding a violence that reduces to silence the multiple voices of political discourse. Only authoritarianism and violence can invest the dialogic potentialities of the political.[4]

But in circumstances as complex as these, how should the question of what constitutes political meaning be posed? How can a discourse of hope be reactivated without falling back into the multiple traps which are strewn across its conceptual network – theodicy, progressism, naturalism?

I would like briefly at this point to make reference to the social movements and collective actions of so-called *post-modernity*. It is less a question of revisiting a topic which has already been thoroughly examined – being the way in which the end of the historicist account has had a hermeneutically retroactive effect on the forms of subjectivisation of collectives and on the absence of totalisation – than to try to extract some or other inherent factor relating to the hope associated with these actions and movements. We immediately observe a sequence which passes from the idea of the *subject of history* to that of *structure-actor relativity*, then to arrive finally at the notions of *subject positions* (Laclau & Balibar 2010), in which collective subjects appear under the mode of contingence and the irreducible plurality of this. But another phenomenon, linked to globalisation, may equally be observed. It relates to those forms of protest which are no longer restricted to struggles to assert difference and its consequent recognition, but which hark back to a much earlier model of the collective involving the struggle for equality or, in the terms of Jacques Rancière (1998) and Étienne Balibar (2010), the ''agonal verification of equality'' upon the scenes of conflict. The expression and grammar of this is to be found in the struggles of the ''-less'': the ''jobless'', the ''landless'', the ''documentless'', the ''homeless'' ... In this context one cannot avoid calling to mind, though in discontinuous and indirect fashion, the struggles of the plebeians and proletarians of ancient Rome, the revolts of peasants and poor that marked the beginnings of European states such as the insurrection of Thomas Münzer in Germany, those of the English Levellers of the 17th century or that of the ''Manifesto of the Equal'' at the end of the French Revolution. May I be permitted to illustrate my point via a passage from Ernst Tugendhat:

> We see ourselves here confronted with the principal qualitative distinction between individuals in modernity. I refer to the distinction between the poor and the wealthy, between those who have resources and those who do not. Even if it is a case of a gradual difference, we can make abstraction of this aspect: it is sufficient, when we speak of the poor, to refer to those who are in what one is accustomed to calling absolute poverty, those who have neither work nor resources. (Tugendhat 2002: 30)

It would seem that a gap is opening at the very heart of post-modernity, slipping in between the figures and tropes that poetically frame our present. The perception of the collectives, conceived as they were in terms of a struggle for difference, could be framed at the dawn of the 80s in terms of post-modern ludic perspectives: through the fragmentary character of games of language, multiculturalism, the end of meta-accounts, an absence of totalisation. But the movement of those numbered among the "-less", the "landless", the "homeless", the "jobless", the "document-less" cannot be encompassed by the ludic tonality of these types of figures based on the multiplication of the "little accounts". Indeed, they bring forcefully to light the traumatic dimensions of social injustice and political exclusion, and do so through a tragic tonality which thrusts into view the growing inequality on the world scale. This produces, in Ernesto Laclau's terms (2010) "chains of equivalence", of which the struggles for equality are striking examples. It is therefore not surprising to see emerging, from the end of the 90s and from right within the Marxist and post-Marxist traditions that had accompanied the minorities' movements by insisting on the right to difference and subjectivisation, a new vocabulary illustrated by the notions of the *place-less* (*sans-part*) in Jacques Rancière's study (1995), of *Homo Sacer* with Agamben (1995), of *Multitude* with Virno (2003) and Negri and Hardt (2004). In these can be observed a return to the idea of *injustice* and *privation*, viewed less as a defective part of a teleological promise as a register of traces and relics of other tragic forms of the political, linked to exclusion and which are raising their heads again in our late modernity. We are aware of the linkages established by Rancière between the underclass of Rome and the "place-less", between the Athenian *demos* and those deprived of any voice within the *polis*; we know too of the Roman matrix of the *homo sacer* in Agamben and the Spinozist matrix of the notion of *multitude* in Paolo Virno, in contrast to the national and sovereign formation of a *people*.

There is thus an alternation within post-modernity, almost without a continuity solution, between two sorts of post-revolutionary and post-historical collective actions. On the one hand, those based on identity and the respect for difference; on the other, those which are articulated around equality, justice and the rejection of exclusion. The idea of justice, which accompanies the struggle against deprivation, is borne "in *excess*" in relation to established law, to use an expression of Derrida (1995) borrowed from Benjamin (1978). One can thus see it not as a reified system of rights, but as the reappearance of a praxis that is disruptive of the instituted order. The idea of justice, in this sense, always constitutes a political breach. It disrupts the rules of the game of governmentality in the political or bio-economic forms through which the latter adapts itself to capitalist globalisation. In this sense, justice disrupts the space of the myth: for Benjamin, it is the intrusion of the dimension of tragedy into the mythological world, the intrusion of Antigone into the codified universe of instituted law. From this perspective, one can assert that justice introduces a tragic trope between the ludic trope of post-modernity and the mythic and naturalist trope of globalisation and its bio-political governance.

Justice thus renders plausible a dimension of profane hope which as much escapes the theodicy of automatic progress as that of religious salvation. It suspends the *status quo* through the tragic and conflictual trope of a *concrete utopia*.

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The concrete utopia (*konkrete Utopie*) is not for Bloch (1959) an ideal that is asymptotically approachable as is the *City of God* of Saint Augustine (2005) or like the chiliasm of cosmopolitan peace in Kant. Neither is it a determinant judgement in the way theoretical judgements are, under which may be subsumed each of the different particular situations, in the same way as a scientific principle of general extension will apply to concrete cases. But nor is it a normative theory as can be the Rawlsian theory of justice, the Habermasian theory of deliberative democracy or that of the ideal discourse situation. The idea of the ''concrete utopia'' seems to function in Bloch in a way which appears close to the notion of aesthetic judgement such as understood by Kant in his third *Critique* (1978). When we proffer an aesthetic judgement to critique a work of art, says Kant, we understand beauty neither in terms of a universal theory in the sense of a scientific theory (through a determinant judgement), nor as an asymptotic *telos* of an infinite finality (a teleological judgement), nor as a moral judgement. More simply, we judge a work of art from the stand-point of a ''self-reflective'' idea, that is, an idea which relates to the singular situation of that particular work of art, starting out from what Kant in his third *Critique* called the *sensus communis*, that is, a hermeneutic knowledge that is of both an open and an interpretative nature. From this point of view, the concrete beauty implied by the aesthetic judgement does not produce an idea of necessary and determinant content, even though it does lay claim to a certain *situated* universality in the sense that the judgement must be shared by others. It is this aesthetic judgement and not a general theory of beauty which, still in Kant's view, makes art criticism possible.

So if, in the manner of Hannah Arendt, we move from the domain of aesthetic judgement to the politically concrete, perhaps we may then arrive at a more accurate idea of what Bloch understands as a utopia which, in relation to our situation on ''planet Earth'' would paradoxically function as a ''telescope'' (*Fernrohr*) (Bloch 1959: 366), rendering possible a space of critical detachment. From this point of view, the ''concrete utopia'' is an element which is in structural solidarity with the critique but in the sense of an incisive and singular intervention arising from the concretion of particular cases. Equality thus does not remain *enclosed in a frame* whether as a determinant judgement or as an historic *telos*, but as a permanent verification on all the stages on to which it bursts and is produced through performative process.

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

Notes

1. On the relation between Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt around sovereignty, see Benjamin's letter to Schmitt of 12 September 1930 (Benjamin 1997: 558). It was Samuel Weber (1992) who was one of the first to reopen the Benjamin-Schmitt dossier on sovereignty, but the investigation would have been incomplete without the contribution of Horst Bredekamp (1999) and of Giorgio Agamben (2003a), as we have already drawn attention to in a prior study on the subject (Naishtat 2008).
2. ''Nur um der Hoffnungslosen willen ist uns die Hoffnung gegeben'' (Benjamin 1978c: 201).
3. See the section that Jean-Michel Palmier devotes to the notion of the phantasmagoria in his monumental study of Walter Benjamin (Palmier 2006: 447–536).
4. Walter Benjamin (1978d: 203) pointed out in his Theologico-Political Fragment that: ''[...] the profane order cannot be built on the idea of the kingdom of God, that is why theocracy has no political sense but only a religious sense. To have thoroughly rejected any political meaning for theocracy is the greatest merit of Bloch's Spirit of Utopia''.

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