

**Is Cosmopolitan Community Possible?
Liberalism, Global Solidarity and the Political**

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Introduction¹

This article seeks to contribute to the debate on the possibility of a cosmopolitan political community which would, according to the proponents of the idea, supersede international anarchy, thus revolutionising the existing world order. This debate has been a remarkable feature of the theoretical development in the discipline of International Relations (IR) during the last decade, especially after the publication of Alexander Wendt's influential article on the inevitability of a world state.² It reflects a growing interest in the problem of the universal that is characteristic of contemporary political thought.³ One of the central dividing lines in this discussion is between those scholars who support a critically revised version of Carl Schmitt's claim that any political community is necessarily based on antagonism and exclusion,⁴ and their opponents who believe in the possibility of a non-exclusionary and non-antagonistic cosmopolitan politics. The former camp includes mostly realists, liberal internationalists and poststructuralists, while the latter is populated by liberal universalists, liberal constructivists and some poststructuralist thinkers looking for the ways to go beyond Schmittian antagonistic vision of politics.

This article briefly assesses the current state of the debate on cosmopolitan community and then addresses certain key areas where, in my view, remaining conceptual misunderstandings prevent the participants from fully spelling out their positions to each other. In particular, I concentrate on the ontological differences between liberalism and poststructuralism which, as long as they are not laid plain, distort the exchange of ideas on the nature of the political and on the issues of identity, recognition and exclusion. I contend that in the poststructuralist ontology, which rejects any pre-existing ontological hierarchies, antagonism remains the only force that can constitute an inside-outside boundary and thus establish an identity. Besides, modern political rationality interprets the inherent dislocation of any identity as a threat and engages in security practices to externalize alternative articulations of identity and establish an ideological façade of a self-evident and bounded

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² Alexander Wendt, 'Why a World State Is Inevitable', *European Journal of International Relations*, 9:4 (2003), pp. 491–542.

³ To name but a few recent works particularly relevant in the context of this article: Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Alain Badiou, *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London, New York: Routledge, 2005); Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

⁴ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

community. Hence, one needs to agree with Sergei Prozorov when he insists that generic politics can only be post-identitarian,⁵ and a cosmopolitan *identity* cannot but cover up an exclusion much more radical than in any particularist articulation.

Trying to spell out his vision of post-identitarian politics, Prozorov turns to the notions of generic community developed by two influential contemporary philosophers – Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben. He treats these two versions of generic politics as largely equivalent, since both authors view generic politics through the prism of subtraction from the dialectical process. In my view this reading is not entirely correct, because the two philosophers diverge in their interpretation of the key question of how subtraction relates to antagonism. While for Agamben subtraction can amount to a withdrawal, which undercuts the authority of the Master by simply ignoring it, Badiou’s generic subject is always ready to confront the power of the state. The analysis of difference between the two visions of generic politics highlights another key argument of this article: even if we can conceive of a truly generic community that is not grounded in any identity and therefore does not presuppose external othering as constitutive practice, we might still need antagonistic politics in order to make this community possible. Even though the subject of generic emancipation is not yet known to us, there are reasons to believe that this praxis is bound to face resistance and thus will necessarily involve antagonistic negation of the existing order.

Apart from Badiou’s philosophy, the theoretical approach of this article has been informed by poststructuralist theory of hegemony developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. It inherits the Schmittian understanding of the political, but undertakes its thorough critical revision which makes it suitable for a radical democratic theory that Laclau and Mouffe advance.⁶ Badiou’s (and Agamben’s) generic politics and Laclau and Mouffe’s hegemony are not entirely compatible; they do indeed yield very different images of the political when applied to certain key issues of theory and practice. I do believe, however, that to some extent this is a level-of-analysis problem: hegemony theory works very well as a conceptualisation of ‘normal’ identitarian politics, but is unable to step beyond this point. The ‘generic’ version, on the other hand, can conceive of post-identitarian alternatives, but often becomes redundant when less radical questions are at stake.⁷

⁵ Sergei Prozorov, ‘Generic Universalism in World Politics’, *International Theory*, 1:2 (2009), pp. 215–47.

⁶ See, in particular, Chantal Mouffe (ed.) *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt* (London: Verso, 1999); Mouffe, *On the Political*, pp. 8–34.

⁷ In fact, the question of potential complementarity between the two perspectives can provide a starting point for an inspiring discussion, but for obvious reasons it cannot be addressed in this article.

This article begins at the level of identitarian politics by discussing the difference between liberal and poststructuralist understandings of identity and community. In the next section I present a brief overview of the debate on cosmopolitan community and the criticism of the concept advanced by Chantal Mouffe. Sections two and three will highlight major ontological differences between liberal universalism and poststructuralism. It is my contention that a failure to appreciate these differences is behind much of liberal criticism against the poststructuralist understanding of identity politics as necessarily antagonistic. In the fourth section, I move on to the more radical alternatives and compare the versions of generic community put forward by Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben, taking issue with certain aspects of their interpretation by Sergei Prozorov. This leads me to the concluding remarks about the significance of the emancipatory agenda for our vision of the future cosmopolitan world order. The reader is kindly asked to bear in mind that, even though this paper engages in an interdisciplinary debate, it is written from within the disciplinary perspective of IR. Consequently, my starting point is the problem of international anarchy which has a formative significance for the entire field of international studies, and I focus first of all on the texts and authors which advance similar agenda. I do not claim to contribute to the philosophical dispute between and around Agamben and Badiou; my sole ambition when contrasting their approaches is to formulate questions relevant in the context of my own discipline. Given that IR scholars are only starting to appreciate the value of discussing generic politics, I see my task in providing linkages to the more established intra-disciplinary debates, rather than in coming up with any final conclusions.

Overcoming international anarchy: the state of the debate

The idea of a cosmopolitan community has a long history starting at least from Immanuel Kant. It may, indeed, be argued that the search for the ways of overcoming the intrinsic fragmentation of the international system was the foundational mission of IR as a discipline. As Prozorov aptly notes, IR theory is ‘a discourse driven by the frustrated desire for the transcendence of its object [i.e. international anarchy] and only retains its disciplinary identity insofar as this desire remains frustrated’.⁸ Up until the 1990s, cosmopolitanism was defended mostly by liberal IR, which developed in confrontation with realism. Central to the discipline was the question of whether, and under which circumstances, cooperative

⁸ Prozorov, ‘Generic Universalism’, p. 216.

behaviour would be rational and international solidarity feasible. In as much as the liberals disagreed among themselves, it was on the question of the relative merits of supranational state versus stronger international institutions. The proponents of liberal universalism supported the idea of radically eliminating international anarchy through the creation of a global sovereign, while their liberal internationalist critics warned about the dangers of a worldwide dictatorship and promoted the idea of a pluralist international society.⁹ State sovereignty was not questioned by the liberals in any fundamental way – their solution to international anarchy consisted in either limiting it by legal and other means, or elevating it to the global level.

The advent of the reflectivist paradigm in 1980-90s changed the structure of the by breaking through the disciplinary boundaries and bringing in important insights from political philosophy and historical sociology. Inter alia, the new approaches refused to treat sovereignty as a self-evident constant: the concept was historicized and problematized in many different ways. It was demonstrated that modern sovereign statehood emerged out of the unique historical situation of early modern Europe and that it went through substantial transformations during the next centuries. The boundary between domestic and international politics was also reconceptualised by, for instance, pointing out to national identity as a product, rather than just a source, of foreign policy.¹⁰

As it turned out, one of the most productive new engagements in IR has been with Carl Schmitt and his notion of the political. Schmitt's view of politics as inherently antagonistic has contributed to new approaches to international anarchy and conflict and made a crucial impact on security studies. Most importantly, however, disentangled from the state-centrism typical for Schmitt, his view of global politics as a pluriversum and the sharp criticism of liberal universalism provided realists and poststructuralists, but also liberal internationalists with an important intellectual resource against the neo-Hegelian vision of the end of history.

It is not surprising therefore that the proponents of global political unification and, speaking more generally, of the liberal vision of politics as aimed at consensus, spare no effort in trying to rebut Schmittean antagonistic understanding of politics and to insist on the feasibility of a cosmopolitan community. The flaws of the mainstream cosmopolitan

⁹ The classical distinction between realism, universalism and internationalism as forms of thought about international anarchy was introduced in Headley Bull, *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

¹⁰ David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, rev. ed., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

argument have been successfully exposed by Chantal Mouffe. Inter alia, she demonstrates how the liberals such as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens,¹¹ while insisting that collective forms of life have become obsolete, construct ‘traditionalist’ as the enemy.¹² This opens the way for the emergence of an extreme antagonism which, exactly as Schmitt warned, feeds on the claim that individualisation promotes ‘non-adversarial’ politics. A similar extreme form of exclusion is produced by Jürgen Habermas’ vision of ‘dialogical democracy’¹³: the belief in universal rationality as the basis for eventual consensus around liberal democratic principles classifies any rejection of liberal democracy as irrational and therefore, in the final analysis, anti-human.¹⁴ Various forms of cosmopolitan democracy, promoted by such authors as Richard Falk, David Held and Mary Kaldor,¹⁵ either exclude those states which are considered non-democratic or embrace a completely de-politicized, technocratic models of ‘global governance’, lacking any mechanisms to ensure accountability and implementation of declared universal human rights.¹⁶

Finally, beyond the liberal paradigm Mouffe attacks the theories of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Their immanent and unstructured multitude, which is bound to revolt against the empire and establish its own non-exclusionary radical democratic order¹⁷ is, according to Mouffe’s verdict, ‘messianically announced but never theoretically established’, while any political movement embracing this explicitly anti-subjectivist project ‘would, no doubt, condemn itself to political irrelevance’.¹⁸ Regardless of whether we call it ‘exodus’, ‘the rejection of power-over for the sake of power-to’, ‘militant apathy’, ‘nomadisation’, ‘defection’, or ‘viral politics’¹⁹, all these ideal images of ‘post-hegemonic’ politics take for granted a liberal state that would not repress grassroots initiatives as long as they simply make it a matter of principle to ignore the state. However, had these initiatives indeed come

¹¹ Ulrich Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics: Rethinking Modernity in the Global Social Order* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997); Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994).

¹² Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, pp. 35–51.

¹³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).

¹⁴ Mouffe, *On the Political*, pp. 83–89.

¹⁵ Richard Falk, *The Costs of War: International Law, the UN, and World Order after Iraq* (New York; London: Routledge, 2008); David Held, *Democracy and the Global Order* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995); Held, *Global Covenant: The Social Democratic Alternative to the Washington Consensus* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); Mary Kaldor, *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).

¹⁶ See David Chandler, ‘New Rights or Old? Cosmopolitan Citizenship and the Critique of State Sovereignty’, *Political Studies*, 51:2 (2003), pp. 332–49; Mouffe, *On the Political*, pp. 83–107.

¹⁷ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

¹⁸ Mouffe, *On the Political*, pp. 111, 114. See also Jacques Rancière, ‘Peuple ou multitudes?’, *Multitudes* 9 (2002), <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/Peuple-ou-multitudes>.

¹⁹ See Benjamin Ardit, ‘Post-Hegemony: Politics Outside the Usual Post-Marxist Paradigm’, *Contemporary Politics* 13:3 (2007), pp. 217–24.

closer to revolutionising the existing political order, the state would inevitably attempt to ‘regulate’ them, thus imposing a violent external Other on a community that does not want to engage in antagonistic politics. In other words, even if Hegel’s Slave would want to become a Citizen in a non-violent manner, without antagonising the Master, the latter is still likely to disagree and to keep violently denying recognition to the Slave. The only option for the Slave then is to kill the Master²⁰ – unless he wants to remain a slave for the outside world and to create some sort of imaginary freedom just in his private domain. If this is what is meant by ‘post-hegemony’, we are dealing with no more than a form of escapism that does not have any universalist aspirations, and the theoretical and practical value of discussing it is nil.

The devastating critique by Mouffe very clearly spells out the disagreements between poststructuralism and the mainstream cosmopolitan argument. It is not surprising that her writings on the topic are an obligatory reference point for anyone engaging in the debate.²¹ However, there remain certain intricate issues where in my view Mouffe’s analysis does not go deep enough. One of them is her promotion of a multipolar world order, to which I shall turn at the end of section 3. Before doing that, however, it is important to consider the question of whether exclusion is a necessary precondition of any identity. Among the diverse texts which try to invalidate this premise, the article by Arash Abizadeh in the *American Political Science Review*²² stands out as a systematic and thorough treatment of the anti-cosmopolitan case. In the next two sections I will therefore focus my analysis on Abizadeh’s contribution, bringing in other authors’ arguments whenever they are relevant.

Liberal critique of antagonistic politics and the ontological status of boundaries

In contrast to Wendt, whose Hegelian world state is a product of mainly, if not exclusively, the struggle for recognition,²³ Abizadeh explicitly embarks on the endeavour to review all arguments against a non-exclusionary cosmopolitan identity and ‘to demonstrate [...] that the particularist thesis, construed as a conceptual or metaphysical claim about the inherent nature of collective identity, solidarity, or community, does not stand to reason’. In sum, there are two assertions he makes to prove this point. Firstly, while agreeing that

²⁰ See Prozorov, ‘Generic Universalism’, pp. 224–25 for a detailed discussion with reference to Alexandre Kojève and his interpretation of Hegel.

²¹ See Abizadeh, ‘Does Collective Identity Presuppose an Other? On the Alleged Incoherence of Global Solidarity’, *American Political Science Review* 99:1 (2005), pp. 45–60; Prozorov, ‘Generic Universalism’, pp. 220–21; Arditì, ‘Post-Hegemony’, pp. 205–11.

²² Arash Abizadeh, ‘Does Collective Identity’.

²³ Wendt, ‘Why a World State Is Inevitable’, pp. 528–29.

‘identity presupposes *difference*’, Abizadeh rejects the premise ‘that it presupposes an external *other*’.²⁴ Secondly, even if some form of othering and exclusion are necessary for the constitution of identity, they do not in his view have to be antagonistic: a mere difference would suffice to sustain the existence of the Self.

Abizadeh describes ‘the particularist argument’ as organized along several lines: conceptual vs. metaphysical, the recognition/dialogical argument, the Schmittean enemy argument vs. the Derridean difference argument. It must be made clear from the outset that my critique of Abizadeh does not amount to a defence of each and every version of the particularist position. However, my own critical attitude to, in particular, Hegel, Taylor and Schmitt is based on ontology and epistemology very different from Abizadeh’s. Highlighting those differences is important as a way to demonstrate certain key faults in the liberal position on such issues as global democracy and cosmopolitan community.

Liberalism: the pre-eminence of the individual

In order to spell out these theoretical disagreements, it is convenient to start with the question of the ontological status both of the individual and of political boundaries. In Abizadeh’s worldview individual human being is endowed with unquestioned ontological priority, while the political boundaries separate one group of individuals from another. This is evident already in the very first conceptual claim made by Abizadeh, that ‘[w]hile *individual* identity may indeed be inherently particular, *collective* identity is not’.²⁵ Addressing the recognition/dialogical argument, he goes on to argue that collective identity can be relational without being particular, because ‘the recognition required by a *collective* identity *can* come solely from the (other) individuals who make up that collectivity’. Similarly, ‘the dialogue might simply take place among [a collectivity’s] own constituent members’.²⁶ In all these respects, Abizadeh does not diverge from Wendt, for whom individuals are ‘ultimately’ the constitutive parts of the international system, while the struggle for recognition operates on two easily distinguishable levels – ‘between individuals and between groups’.²⁷ Turning to Carl Schmitt and Chantal Mouffe, Abizadeh takes issue with the understanding of politics as inherently antagonistic; in his interpretation, the Schmittean ‘enemy is supposed to consist in

²⁴ Abizadeh, ‘Does Collective Identity’, p. 45. Henceforth, unless otherwise indicated, emphasis in quotations is in the original.

²⁵ Abizadeh, ‘Does Collective Identity’, p. 47.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 48.

²⁷ Wendt, ‘Why a World State Is Inevitable’, pp. 504, 516.

an *empirically specifiable group(s) of actually existing concrete individuals*'.²⁸ All these statements are based on the assumption that the social and political world consists of individuals as primary units, whereas any type of political community is a mechanical combination of 'actually existing individuals'.

Same ontology lies beneath Abizadeh's treatment of boundaries. Thus, he finds it necessary to differentiate between four types of Other: an entity's Other in the strict sense is 'another entity that shares *no* constituent parts with it'; besides, there is also overlapping Other which 'shares some and only some elements' with the first entity, encompassed Other which is fully included in the first entity, and encompassing Other which, on the contrary, fully includes the first entity.²⁹ He then goes on to demonstrate at length that the Other required for the constitution of the identity of the Self can be internal as well as external. Similar approach is discernible in Abizadeh's conceptualisation of exclusion, which he equates with a denial of membership. Even though he admits that a denial of membership does not have to be formal and can consist in marginalisation, misrecognition etc., we are still dealing with a strictly hierarchical ontology in which every whole consists of a limited and countable number of elements (e.g. the state consists of a certain number of citizens, possesses a certain territory subdivided into regions or provinces; individuals sharing similar views unite in political parties and movements and oppose other individuals sharing different views, and so on). To be sure, an individual can belong to many different entities and groupings, but, looking at the empirical situation of an individual or any other pre-given entity, we can always clearly identify relations of belonging and exclusion.

Mouffe presents her understanding of politics in the following way: 'Politics aims at the creation of unity in a context of conflict and diversity; it is always concerned with the creation of an "us" by the determination of a "them"'.³⁰ In Abizadeh's interpretation this statement is equivalent to an openly reductionist one: 'every collective identity simultaneously and necessarily excludes *some individuals* from its constitution'.³¹ What for Mouffe is a confrontation between two political *positions*, for Abizadeh becomes reduced to a conflict between two *groups of individuals*.

This reductionism can hardly be deemed satisfactory in view of the recent theoretical developments. It illustrates Nick Vaughan-Williams' indictment of the current theoretical literature which 'continues to rely upon an unexamined epistemological and ontological

²⁸ Abizadeh, 'Does Collective Identity', p. 55.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 51–52.

³⁰ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 101.

³¹ Abizadeh, 'Does Collective Identity', p. 55 (emphasis added).

anchor point provided by the concept of the border of the state'.³² It was already in the early 1990s that such authors as David Campbell and R. B. J. Walker demonstrated the problematic nature of the customary separation between domestic politics and international relations. The outside is produced in an effort to establish sovereign rule over the inside, and therefore 'it is not possible to simply understand international relations as the existence of atomized states that are fully fledged intensive identities'; on the contrary, 'foreign policy comes to be seen as a political practice that makes "foreign" certain events and actors'.³³ More recently, Nick Vaughan-Williams, relying on Giorgio Agamben's notion of bare life, proposed the concept of the 'generalized bio-political border' that 'reconceptualises the limits of sovereign power as a decision on the status of life that can effectively happen everywhere: a multi-faceted and decentred bio-political apparatus that is as mobile as the subjects it seeks to control'.³⁴ In all these accounts, state border does not separate two given territories or a relatively stable group of member individuals from the non-members. Instead, it emerges as an effect of sovereign power which can be exercised anywhere and in relation to anyone, while at the same time playing a constitutive role in the production of the sovereign power itself.

These accounts of political boundaries, however, remain state-centric; or, rather, they focus on the state and its sovereign power as the key phenomenon that needs theoretical reassessment at a qualitatively new level. Abizadeh, however, explicitly rejects this focus. He insists – and here I could not agree more – that many particularist conceptualisations of political identity are nothing but the result of a failure to appreciate the fact that the sovereign nation state is historically contingent. Limiting our imaginary to sovereign territorial state as the only possible form of political community obviously makes any universalist alternative to international fragmentation either utopian or leading to the unilateral domination in the name of arbitrarily defined 'universal human values'.

Poststructuralism: the primacy of the discursive

A theoretical departure that enables one to talk about borders without sovereignty and statehood as pre-givens is provided by poststructuralist theory of hegemony. In this respect it departs from the Gramscian notion of historical bloc, which is developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe into the concept of hegemonic formation. Hegemony is an operation

³² Vaughan-Williams, 'The Generalized Bio-Political Border?', p. 749.

³³ Campbell, *Writing Security*, p. 61. See also R. B. J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

³⁴ Vaughan-Williams, 'The Generalized Bio-Political Border?', p. 749.

through which a particular identity is universalized, i.e. elevated to a position where it can represent the community as a whole.³⁵ The conventional modern form of struggle for hegemony is the competition around the notion of the national interest between different parties and movements, each representing a particular view of common good, but each claiming the right to speak in the name of the nation as a whole. However, theory of hegemony does not have to rely on any ontological hierarchies in order to conceive of the political. Whereas in the state-centric accounts state sovereignty, even if contingent as to its empirical embodiment, still remains an indispensable locus to be seized in order to exercise power, hegemony theory is able to treat the pre-eminence of the state in modern times as an empirical fact rather than as theoretical prerequisite. This is so because the power which enables a particular identity to become hegemonic is derived not from the state but from antagonism.

Antagonism is what makes unity possible in a world which is envisaged as lacking any pre-given metaphysical hierarchies. If we follow Ernesto Laclau in describing the social as a level field where all differences have the same ontological status (or, for that matter, adopt Alain Badiou's view of any situation as a pure multiplicity³⁶), it becomes obvious that

A neutral limit would be one which is essentially continuous with what is at its two sides, and the two sides are simply different from each other. [...] In the case of an exclusion we have, instead, authentic limits because the actualisation of what is beyond the limit of exclusion would involve the impossibility of what is on this side of the limit. True limits are always antagonistic.³⁷

Antagonism, understood as violent negation of constitutive outside, is what makes political unity possible in the absence of any prioritized locus of power, such as sovereign state. While the establishment of hegemony most probably presupposes a sovereign subject (but *not* a sovereign state), the reproduction of the hegemonic situation is a structural self-sustaining process which can be conceptualized without relying on the notion of subjectivity or sovereignty. What is even more important for us here is the fact that a boundary produced by antagonism can run anywhere in the political space, which itself acquires an autonomous ontological status. In other words, a political community constituted through antagonism is *neither* a state *nor* a group of individuals, it does *not* have a territory or any other necessary connection with the geographical space. A political community may try to establish a

³⁵ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985), pp. 134–45.

³⁶ See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (London, New York: Continuum, 2007).

³⁷ Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 37.

sovereign state or speak in the name of the existing state by articulating a particular vision of state borders, national identity and the national interest. It may, on the other hand, position itself as an explicitly anti-statist project, such as the classical workers' movement of the late nineteenth – early twentieth century. It can even try to ignore the state, as in the case of certain autonomist or localist movements. The difficulty of providing an example of a contemporary political community which would be able to ignore the state systematically is due to the historically contingent reality of our world in which the state strives to control each and every sphere of public life – but this, as pointed out above, is an empirical fact and not a theoretical necessity.

Community produced through hegemonic operation is still particularistic and exclusionary, because its very existence depends on universalising some particular identities at the expense of antagonising a constitutive outside. But in relations between themselves political communities are neither hierarchical nor mutually exclusive because multiple hegemonic projects operate in any given political space, competing for the same discursive and material resources. Their competition leads to their mutual dislocation, so that neither community is complete and fully sutured. Adopting an individualist perspective in such an analysis is not exactly possible: it is not that an individual freely chooses to belong to a particular community; neither is she forced to make a choice. Rather, the very status of the individual, the value of human life, the autonomy of individual decision etc. are culturally and politically conditioned. Free will and individual responsibility remain valid notions, but their applicability is limited to the microsocial level, to private histories and experiences. These experiences can consist in safely belonging to some communities and being fully excluded from others, but also can pass through various zones of indistinction where the status of individual human being remains suspended for a brief moment or indefinitely.

It must be clear by now that Abizadeh's criticism of particularism and the antagonistic view of politics is valid only in relation to those of his opponents who stay on the same relatively modest theoretical ground as himself – such as Charles Taylor or Anthony D. Smith. It is to a large extent misplaced even when directed against Carl Schmitt, and it completely misses the point in the case of such radical thinkers as Chantal Mouffe. A political community created through the operation of hegemony antagonizes a particular political position and *not* a clearly defined empirically identifiable group of physically existing human beings. The fact that any political position is regularly expressed by actually existing individuals does not justify endowing individuals with a higher ontological status than that of antagonism itself. On the contrary, while speaking about politics empirically

existing individuals constantly shift between different discourses, make contradictory statements, adjust what they say to the expectations of the audience and so on. We can sway an individual opponent to our side, thus making her one of our own, but even if this is an important political leader, this will not in itself reduce the intensity of the constitutive antagonism.³⁸ Conversely, if we hold enough power, we can designate a particular individual or group as representing the enemy, and even have them incarcerated or destroyed. In a certain sense, it may be argued that political discourses ‘speak’ through particular individuals, not vice versa; and they also interpellate concrete individuals into specific positions in the political space. The being of a discourse is much more firmly rooted in the historical situation than the contingent existence of particular individuals in this or that subject position. To be sure, intense political contradiction can and often does result in the physical destruction of individual human beings, but this is not a definitional feature of adversarial politics, since a very forceful political antagonism can be reproduced indefinitely without translating into physical struggle. Even less significance has the fact that this particular individual gets killed, while another one escapes: what matters is how the killers define the group they target, and that is a discursive phenomenon independent of the existence of any concrete individual human being.

It is therefore incorrect to interpret, as Abizadeh does, the Schmittean or poststructuralist notion of exclusion involved in the creation of any political identity as a denial, formal or effective, of membership. He is right to maintain that ‘the Derridean category of the constitutive outside is not coterminous with an empirically specifiable set of concrete individuals’,³⁹ but wrongly concludes that for this reason the constitutive outside can be located inside. A definitional feature of a political community is that it excludes other political positions and/or identities, not individual human beings. However – and this is what makes the liberal argument unsustainable – exclusion can still severely affect individual lives, because *anyone* can end up on the outer side of the boundary separating ‘good citizens’ from ‘enemies of the people’ or ‘terrorists’. Being recognized as a member of an inclusive cosmopolitan liberal democracy does not guarantee anyone from incidental interpellation into

³⁸ This, in effect, was a point made already by Schmitt when he insisted on the need to differentiate between the political enemy and the private adversary: Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 28–29.

³⁹ Abizadeh, ‘Does Collective Identity’, p. 57. The term ‘constitutive outside’ was actually introduced by Henry Staten as an umbrella for various words and phrases employed by Derrida. See Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 16.

the subject position of an enemy, as it happened to Jean Charles de Menezes, shot by the UK anti-terrorist officers in the aftermath of the terrorist attack in London in July 2005.⁴⁰

There is therefore no point in opposing collective identity to individual one, insisting that while the latter might be necessarily particular, the former is not. And it is simply logically impossible to claim, as a ground for advancing the idea of cosmopolitan identity, that a political adversary may be internal: while the constitutive outside can indeed be *domestic* from the point of view of a territorial state or any other hegemonic order, it is still by definition located on the outer side of the border delineating the internal space of a political community (whether it is imagined as a state, a class, or as entire humanity).

Consequently, the first counterargument advanced by Abizadeh against the ‘particularist’ position – that constitutive outside can actually be internal – is only sustainable as long as we stick to liberal individualist ontology, which is explicitly rejected by poststructuralists. His criticism might be valid in the context of the debate between the particularist (Taylor) and the cosmopolitan (Wendt) versions of the Hegelian theory of recognition,⁴¹ but cannot be deployed against poststructuralist political theory. If liberal theorists want to engage with the notion of constitutive *outside*, they would have to start by confronting the philosophical premises of poststructuralism, instead of simply trying to impose their own ontology on political thought that has very different, and much more radical, philosophical origins.

Modern politics: antagonistic and ideological

The second major counterargument Abizadeh puts forward against the particularist position is that ‘there are no metaphysical grounds for thinking that a relation of difference is necessarily a relation of antagonism (i.e. for thinking that a possibility of war is always effective and structuring)’.⁴² It would be impossible to argue against this assertion, thus phrased, were it not for the fact that it confuses difference with othering and only because of that can be used as a refutation of the poststructuralist thesis about the constitutive role of

⁴⁰ Vaughan-Williams, ‘The Generalised Bio-Political Border?’, pp. 747–48. Vaughan-Williams uses this fact as an illustration of everyone’s position in the ‘zone of indistinction’ rather than exclusion, but it might be argued that in the act of killing itself Mendes figured as a (mistaken) embodiment of the external enemy.

⁴¹ It must be noted, however, that the normative aspects of the theory of recognition have been much more profoundly criticized by Badiou, see Alain Badiou, *Ethics. An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London, New York: Verso, 2001), pp. 18–29.

⁴² Abizadeh, ‘Does Collective Identity’, p. 57. Abizadeh’s argument is inspired, in particular, by Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* (London, New York: Verso, 1997).

antagonism. What is at stake here is not terminological niceties but a profound disagreement about the nature of the political.

This is evident already in Abizadeh's contention that the adversarial understanding of politics is unwittingly derived from Hobbesian preconceptions of human nature, whereas in the empirical reality 'the other might also be a willing and cooperative *aid* to my survival', not an enemy. Abizadeh thus interprets enmity as 'a contingent, empirical possibility' and accuses Schmitt of wrongly transforming it into 'a metaphysically determinative necessity'.⁴³ This claim is disputed by Sergei Prozorov, who maintains that the status of enmity in Schmitt 'has little to do with any anthropological or theological account of "human nature" but rather arises out of a *vigilant receptivity to the existence of the Other*: "man" is neither good nor evil but simply dangerous because of being different'.⁴⁴ Prozorov links the indispensable nature of enmity in Schmitt's political philosophy with the fact that '[f]or Schmitt, *all* politics is *identity politics*': it does not have to unfold only in a violent mode, but '[w]hat *is* foreclosed in Schmitt's logic is the disappearance of the "most extreme possibility" *qua* possibility, i.e. the formation of a political entity in which the problem of difference would not arise'.⁴⁵

Viewed in this light, the difference between the liberal and the poststructuralist positions with regard to the ontological status of enmity could be quite simply described in terms of Murphy's law. While the liberals believe in the feasibility of a cosmopolitan community because difference does not have to produce enmity in *every* instance, poststructuralists, together with Schmitt, tend to assume that 'anything that can go wrong will go wrong'. It will be noted that Murphy's law is in no way invalidated by the fact that in reality the break-up of things is a relatively infrequent event: it is the sheer possibility of danger that shapes human practices wherever danger is present. Exactly the same may be said about the effects of difference on politics: the possibility of enmity resulting from difference is enough to produce effects (e.g. practices of security) that are real irrespectively of whether the possibility becomes actualized.

Yet apart from the disagreement over whether the glass is half full or half empty, there are also more serious grounds to insist that identitarian politics is unavoidably adversarial. Let us reiterate that in poststructuralist theory of hegemony, unlike in Schmitt's writings, the constitutive nature of antagonism is not derived from ontological alterity as such, but is a logical consequence of the refusal to build ontological hierarchies. In the

⁴³ Abizadeh, 'Does Collective Identity', p. 54.

⁴⁴ Prozorov, 'Generic Universalism', p. 221.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

absence of any privileged locus of power (such as sovereign state) that would create unity amidst an infinite expanse of differences, it is only pure negation of the outside that can produce boundaries and thus make political identity possible.⁴⁶ In order to imagine a cosmopolitan world we certainly have to move beyond the state-centric approach, but this leaves us with antagonism as the only force that can bring identity into existence.

Another consideration that is absolutely crucial to bring up here is the ideological nature of politics – at least as long as it remains identitarian. Abizadeh is absolutely right to point out, referring to Derrida, that ‘difference is internal to the identity itself’ and, moreover, ‘the distinction between what is internal to the identity and what is external to it is always *breaking down*’.⁴⁷ This is not only because the boundary between the Self and the Other has to be internalized by the Self at the moment of its constitution, but also due to the fact that, as pointed out in the previous section, each identity is always articulated in a number of different ways by competing discourses. This refers to any identity as long as it is not entirely sedimented and reduced to just another difference in the relational system of the language, but the more politicized the identity is, the more it is dislocated by the competing articulations.

In academic writing, it is relatively easy to portray the world of politics as populated by shifting boundaries and dislocated identities, but the job of translating this image into political practice still lies largely ahead. Modern political rationality works in the opposite direction, trying to fix the chains of signification and to streamline the fuzzy boundaries. It is ideological not in the sense of being trapped in a false representation of reality (simply because no fixed representation of reality can any longer be accepted as authentic), but in a much more profound way. According to Laclau, it is exactly this refusal to accept ‘the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate suture’ that defines ideology.⁴⁸ A politician would not simply act ‘as if’ national and other identities were stable and unambiguous, he would actively strive to achieve certainty and eliminate all ambiguity. Practical political rationality perceives dislocation of identities and elusiveness of boundaries, so much celebrated by postmodern intellectuals, as threats. It resorts to the language of security in order to identify the enemy, intensify the constitutive antagonism and thus to consolidate the internal space of the political community, declaring its borders clear-cut and

⁴⁶ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. 144.

⁴⁷ Abizadeh, ‘Does Collective Identity’, p. 57.

⁴⁸ Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 92.

self-evident.⁴⁹ In other words, we are dealing again with the irreducible presence of the Master who is not going to step down and has to be confronted even if we ‘know’ that his identity as Master is incomplete and precarious.⁵⁰

The propensity to securitize dislocation is not just an empirical fact, but a structural necessity built in the very logic of modern statehood: the main *raison d’être* of the sovereign state consists in securing the boundary of a political community by keeping anarchy out and protecting order within.⁵¹ Another, and related, reason why political rationality is ideological is the paradoxical nature of politics as a process of arriving at a decision in a situation of radical undecidability, when the decision must serve as its own basis. In this ontology a political subject can only be the one who strives for self-denial: if it succeeds, we witness ‘the moment of closure when the subject’s act of decision changes into its opposite; establishes a new symbolic network by means of which History again acquires the self-evidence of a linear evolution’.⁵² It thus follows that ideological character is a definitional feature of modern political rationality, and it results in the fact that difference with itself, inherent in any identity, actually produces othering and inclusion rather than enables us to eliminate those.

Against this background it must also be clear that the literature on temporal othering, which proliferated in the last 10–15 years, in particular in the field of European Union studies,⁵³ misses the point in as much as it offers the Self’s own past as a constitutive outside which can allegedly serve as the basis for a more benign attitude to the outsiders. In order to be ‘otherable’, a particular part of the past must be politically relevant, which most probably means that there are certain political positions whose interpretation of history does not fit into the mainstream political consensus. As Sergei Prozorov contends in a recent article, ‘any historical action must negate a section of actually existing Space, thereby transforming this present existence into the past’, and therefore ‘it is impossible to negate only temporarily or only spatially’.⁵⁴ Even if we imagine a situation in which the memory of the past is so painful

⁴⁹ For a case study illustrating this point, see Viatcheslav Morozov, ‘Sovereignty and Democracy in Contemporary Russia: A Modern Subject Faces the Post-Modern World’, *Journal of International Relations and Development* 11:2 (2008), pp. 152–80.

⁵⁰ Cf. reference to Prozorov in footnote 20 above.

⁵¹ Campbell, *Writing Security*, pp. 53–72.

⁵² Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 190; see also Laclau, *New Reflections*.

⁵³ See, inter alia, Ole Wæver, ‘Insecurity, Security and Asecurity in the West European Non-war Community’, in Emmanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (eds.) *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 69–118; Thomas Diez, ‘Europe’s Others and the Return of Geopolitics’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17:2 (2004), pp. 319–35; Pertti Joenniemi, ‘Towards a European Union of Post-Security?’, *Cooperation and Conflict* 42:1 (2007), pp. 127–48.

⁵⁴ Sergei Prozorov, ‘The Other As Past and Present: Beyond the Logic of “Temporal Othering” in IR Theory’, *Review of International Studies*, forthcoming.

that it is politically relevant even though entire society coheres in treating it as constitutive outside,⁵⁵ its very presence is likely to decentre the present identity of the Self and invite securitising responses from at least some parts of the ideological spectrum.

In other words, as Bahar Rumelili rightly points out in her critique of liberal constructivism, the idea that a political community can be exclusively grounded in temporal othering actually involves abandoning the basic theoretical premises of constructivism and letting positivist ontology in through the back door: it ‘immediately presupposes a pre-given past that a pre-given [...] collectivity shares’.⁵⁶ In the real world, of course, any discourse of temporal othering is prone to result in the same extreme forms of exclusion that are characteristic of any other forms of non-reflexive universalism (see our discussion of Schmitt and Mouffe in the previous section). It is unfortunate that Rumelili herself is not consistent in her treatment of the otherness problematic: instead of waging her anti-essentialist campaign through to a logical conclusion that a decision on whether one form of othering is better than another must always be situational, she does the opposite by trying to develop a set of *abstract* criteria for normative differentiation between good and bad othering. Not surprisingly, she immediately ends up having to embrace a number of liberal preconceptions, such as that violence must always be avoided, that alterity must always be celebrated, etc.⁵⁷ As a matter of fact, the very idea of establishing a universal hierarchy of the forms of othering is of course inherently liberal, because it is based on the belief that a formalized norm is the best or even the only way of achieving justice. In the end, Rumelili does conclude that any form of othering has its negative sides: thus, inclusive identities tend to ‘construct the Other as less than Self’ and thus ‘necessarily embody a hierarchy’. She ends up with a typically liberal internationalist claim that exclusive identities that do not strive to construct a moral hierarchy work best to preserve peace.⁵⁸ However, the possibility of neutral exclusive identities that are not prone to securitize difference is extremely problematic in view of the above discussion. In any event, cosmopolitan identity must by definition be inclusive, and therefore Rumelili, while sharing certain normative background with liberal universalism, in the end makes a case against the latter.

⁵⁵ The closest empirical example would be of course post-nazi Germany, provided that we forget about the thorny way towards a consensual interpretation of the Holocaust, the *Historikerstreit*, the existence of the extreme right etc. See e.g. Peter Baldwin, *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust and the Historians’ Debate* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990); Maja Zehfuss, *Wounds of Memory: The Politics of War in Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁵⁶ Bahar Rumelili, ‘Interstate Community-Building and the Identity/Difference Predicament’ in Richard Price (ed.) *Moral Limit and Possibility in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 259.

⁵⁷ Rumelili, ‘Interstate Community-Building’, pp. 262–65.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 265; see also pp. 279–80.

Chantal Mouffe herself, when discussing the models of the future world order, in fact deserts her original project of radical democracy and ends up endorsing a version of liberal internationalism. She argues in favour of ‘abandoning the illusory hope for a political unification of the world’ and seeks solution ‘in the pluralisation of hegemonies’: ‘we should advocate the establishment of a multipolar, agonistic world organised around several big regional units with their different cultures and values’.⁵⁹ From the point of view of the global order this is certainly a counter-revolutionary project because it attaches a lot of value to multiplicity of political spaces and thus denies the possibility of global solidarity against the existing power structure. Moreover, it can have some reactionary consequences even at the local level, because it gravitates towards relativism in the debate about the possibility of the universal values. She ends up advocating the idea of ‘multiple modernities’, ‘vernacular models of democracy’ and “‘homeomorphic”, i.e. functional, equivalents of the notion of human rights’.⁶⁰ As a matter of fact, such notions can take us even further down the relativist road than the classical version of liberal internationalism. In the latter, the existence of other states with their own value systems is accepted, but these value systems are not necessarily endorsed. Mouffe’s version, on the contrary, runs a serious risk of providing legitimacy to non-liberal oppressive regimes as an inevitable trade-off in the process of creating a multipolar world. It must be clear that such an endorsement of the status quo might have devastating consequences for any counter-hegemonic project that crosses interstate and civilisational boundaries trying to establish relations of equivalence between different struggles and oppressions all over the world. Instead of solidarity with the oppressed, this vision promotes a feeling of complacency and limits our political horizon to the local political situation, thus, in Badiou’s language, making it easier to include a counter-hegemonic position in the state of the situation and de-politicise it.

Towards post-identitarian politics?

The most radical attempt to date to transcend the inevitably antagonistic character of the political in order to move beyond international anarchy is undertaken by Sergei Prozorov in his recent writings.⁶¹ His version of generic universalism mostly relies on political thought

⁵⁹ Chantal Mouffe, ‘Democracy in a Multipolar World’, *Millennium* 37:3 (2009), p. 553. See also Mouffe, *On the Political*, pp. 90–118.

⁶⁰ Mouffe, ‘Democracy’, pp. 557, 559, 560.

⁶¹ See Prozorov, ‘Generic Universalism’, ‘The Other’; Sergei Prozorov, ‘Giorgio Agamben and the End of History: Inoperative Praxis and the Interruption of the Dialectic’ *European Journal of Social Theory* 12:4

of two prominent contemporary philosophers – Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben. As one may guess given this background, Prozorov’s reasoning is rather complex, and it would be difficult even to summarize it here. What this section will do instead is going through certain elements of the argument which are directly relevant to the above discussion of liberal cosmopolitanism and highlighting potential flaws shared by both approaches.

To begin with, Prozorov treats both of his sources as presenting structurally equivalent argument, even if based on different premises. Both Badiou and Agamben in his view make a case in favour of generic universalism as a way of transcending identitarian pluralism, and converge in terms of the practical imperatives that can be drawn from their teachings. While I do not have major problems with the argument that both philosophers advance generic universalist agenda, I believe that the way each of them develop their ideas leads to two distinct visions of political praxis that need to be evaluated in their own right.

Alain Badiou and generic emancipation

Badiou starts with ontology rooted in set theory, part of contemporary mathematics. His basic premise is nicely summarised by Prozorov in the following way: ‘Badiou conceives of every situation as a pure multiplicity, defined solely by a relation of *belonging*, whereby every multiple is always a multiple of multiples’.⁶² The key distinction on which the whole edifice of Badiou’s ethics is built is between the relations of belonging, which is radically egalitarian (every multiple is a multiple of multiples and a part of another multiple), and inclusion. The latter reconfigures the elements of the situation into subsets which are *identifiable*, countable and finite. Thus, it can be said that identity emerges as an aspect of the *state of the situation* and thus has direct relationship with power.⁶³

Contrary to the whole tradition of thinking in terms of ‘politics of recognition’, and also to Schmitt, what Badiou’s ethics amounts to is a “desublimation” of difference’: alterity in his view ‘must be made both ethically and politically inoperative, i.e. recognised as a banal fact of human existence that is irrelevant as a political criterion’.⁶⁴ This is achieved in a generic world community which is radically egalitarian because, again, it includes not a finite number of individuals (or nations, civilisations, etc.), but an infinite diversity of multiples.

(2009), pp. 523–42; Sergei Prozorov, *Ethics of Post-Communism: History and Social Praxis in Russia* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁶² Prozorov, ‘Generic Universalism’, p. 230.

⁶³ See Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp. 81–83.

⁶⁴ Prozorov, ‘Generic Universalism’, p. 229, 230.

This will mean that ‘all differences have been neutralized and the antagonistic potential of the identitarian and pluralistic logic of the political deactivated, if only because [...] there will be only one subject, namely the world community itself’.⁶⁵

However – and Badiou emphasises this throughout his writings – the end of politics is not to be achieved through depoliticisation. As Prozorov correctly notes, ‘Badiou’s politics is certainly militant and his discourse is not averse to the rhetoric of radical enmity and even the justification of terror’.⁶⁶ A generic world community is not something that can be outlined here and now: the generic subset, Badiou writes, ‘is clearly infinite and remains beyond the reach of completion. Nevertheless, it is possible to state that if it is completed, it will ineluctably be a generic subset’.⁶⁷ The world community thus lies at the horizon of political thinking that must inform our political practice but cannot be set as an immediate goal. We cannot link the present pluriversum with the future world community by simply connecting the dots, because we do not (yet?) have the language to construct a logical chain between the present state of the international situation and the future radically egalitarian ‘figure of the one’. With the disaggregation of the world working class and the bankruptcy of parties and trade unions, we do not have the slightest idea of what the subject of this transformation might be.⁶⁸ The only thing we do know, according to Badiou, is the form that this movement must take – the paradoxical form of an *event*, which disrupts the state of the situation, ‘exposes a foundational void that is true for every element in the situation’,⁶⁹ and which then can be prolonged in time and extended into space indefinitely, through politics that becomes ‘radically universalist, addressed to everyone and to no one in particular’.⁷⁰

Hence, the question that needs to be asked – not *contra* Badiou but *with* Badiou – is the same with which Rumelili confronts liberal universalists: even if we think we know where history ends, we still do not know *how to arrive there*.⁷¹ A key facet of this question is whether it is possible to move towards generic world community in a non-antagonistic manner. In the existing literature trying to ‘disentangle Badiou from Schmitt’ there is only one explicit empirical reference to something that might lead to the emergence of universal subjectivity. It is the ‘Not in Our Name’ (NION) movement as described by Colin Wright – a

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 234.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 234.

⁶⁷ Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings* (London, New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 116.

⁶⁸ See, in particular, ‘Interview with Alain Badiou’, *Carceraaglio*, 16 October 2006, http://scentedgardensfortheblind.blogspot.com/2006_10_15_scentedgardensfortheblind_archive.html.

⁶⁹ Colin Wright, ‘Event or Exception? Disentangling Badiou from Schmitt, or, Towards a Politics of the Void’, *Theory and Event*, 11:2 (2008) [e-journal].

⁷⁰ Prozorov, ‘Generic Universalism’, p. 232.

⁷¹ Rumelili, ‘Interstate Community-Building’, p. 260.

position that emerged out of protest against the ‘war on terror’ declared by U.S. President George W. Bush. What is truly distinctive about the whole discursive logic of ‘Not in Our Name’ is its explicit universalism (the ‘Our’ in NION can be extended to everyone with no exception) with an equally unequivocal refusal to be identified, counted, labelled by the state (‘Our Name’ in NION is everyone’s and no-one’s in particular, it does not speak in the name of any group or identity). As such, it invokes universal belonging by simultaneously opposing any inclusion.⁷²

What also needs to be emphasized, however, is that the starting point of NION is explicitly antagonistic: to use Wright’s words, ‘it destroys (or at least challenges) the citizen-as-unit-of-consent counted by the liberal warring State on the one hand, and creates the *citizen-as-subject-of-resistance* on the other’.⁷³ This form of politics might not be hegemonic in the sense that there is no particular content that is being universalized, but it is still antagonistic as long as there is the Other of the Master which obstructs the emancipation of the Slave. Speaking about the present human condition (as opposed to the horizon of a generic world community) ‘politics beyond antagonism’ is to be found neither in Badiou’s writings⁷⁴ nor among possible empirically identifiable instances of generic politics.

Giorgio Agamben: bankruptcy, inoperosity and the withdrawal

The author whose vision of a ‘coming community’ apparently does involve abandoning antagonistic politics as a practical step here and now is Giorgio Agamben. Agamben grounds his version of generic universalism in the linguistic capacity shared by all humans – it is ‘not a nature, a voice or a common experience in a signifying language; it is the vision of language itself and therefore the experience of language’s limits, its *end*’.⁷⁵ This leads him to a concept of human nature that emphasizes potentiality over any purposeful practice: ‘the only ethical experience’, he writes, ‘is the experience of being (one’s own) potentiality, of being (one’s own) possibility – exposing, that is, in every form one’s own amorphousness and in every act one’s own inactuality’.⁷⁶ The ‘coming community’ that arises from this ontology is described by Prozorov in explicitly post-identitarian terms: it is ‘a

⁷² See Wright, ‘Event’, section IV.

⁷³ Wright, ‘Event’, emphasis added.

⁷⁴ Badiou’s own empirical examples of generic truth procedures, such as Chinese Cultural Revolution or contemporary struggles of migrant workers in France, are even more explicitly antagonistic than NION.

⁷⁵ Agamben, quoted in Prozorov, ‘Generic Universalism’, p. 237.

⁷⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 43.

community devoid of any identitarian predicates, that has liberated itself from historical tasks and is finally able to dwell on its “being-thus” or “whatever-being”⁷⁷.

Apart from the understanding of human nature as pure potentiality, Agamben’s ‘coming community’ is rooted in the historical experience of bankruptcy allegedly shared by all Europeans and perhaps by all humans: ‘one of the few things that can be declared with certainty is that all the peoples of Europe (and, perhaps, all the peoples of the Earth) have gone bankrupt’, Agamben declares, citing examples such as Nazism for the Germans, the civil war for the Spaniards, Vichy for the French, and so on.⁷⁸ Prozorov stresses the fact that grounding universal community in the shared feeling of bankruptcy does not amount to yet another form of temporal othering because there is no way ‘of fleeing one’s bankruptcy either in space or in time’. Rather, we are talking about ‘the human reappropriation of historicity, whereby time is no longer subjected to the work of negation and becomes available for free use in social praxis’. The net outcome in practical terms is the notion of inoperosity – a rediscovery of politics ‘as praxis devoid of all tasks’.⁷⁹ Prozorov summarizes this concept in the following way, referring again to the dialectics of Master and Slave:

Agamben’s version of end of history has nothing to do with the Hegelo-Kojévian eschatological idea of the *fulfilment* of all historical epochs but rather consists in the radical *interruption* of the epochal dimension as such, whereby the Slave does not achieve recognition in the universal homogeneous state but simply suspends his work and in this manner refuses to engage in negating action altogether. The struggle for recognition is thus not won by the Slave through the murder of the Master but simply discontinued, whereby the Slave exits his condition of slavery by abandoning his work and Master is consequently left without anyone to be the Master of.⁸⁰

Prozorov is adamant to demonstrate the equivalence between Badiou’s and Agamben’s conceptual frameworks, in particular between Badiou’s generic community and Agamben’s ‘coming community’.⁸¹ Both concepts are indeed very close and share a common background in the notion of generic emancipation, which was introduced by young Marx as early as 1843 and arguably became the cornerstone of the Marxist paradigm.⁸² Moreover,

⁷⁷ Prozorov, ‘Generic Universalism’, p. 237.

⁷⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 141. Cf. Prozorov, ‘The Other’.

⁷⁹ Prozorov, ‘The Other’.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ See, in particular, Prozorov, ‘Generic Universalism’, p. 237.

⁸² Maksim Kulaev, ‘Marx kak kritik Vestfal’skogo miroporiadka [Marx as a Critic of the Westphalian World Order]’, *Svobodnaia mysl’* 10 (2009), pp. 92–95.

deriving the ‘coming community’ from shared linguistic capacity is similar to the invocation of the ‘general intellect’ by the theorists of the multitude, which can also be traced back to Marx.⁸³ Yet, as Arditì points out, even if ‘this intellect or potential faculty to think [can be] the foundation of social cooperation’, it remains to be seen whether it is ‘enough to create the commonality of the multitude as a *political force*’.⁸⁴

In the case of Badiou, generic subject can only come into being in an event that opens a void in the existing political order; fidelity to this generic experience is bound to be met with resistance on the part of the structural forces: ‘when politics exists, it immediately gives rise to a show of power by the state’.⁸⁵ To be sure, Badiou’s politics is that of subtraction, and in this way it is similar to Agamben’s. Politics starts when the undecidable of the event subtracts from the norm of the situation, and ends immediately if the infinite truth is inscribed in a concept, either pre-existing in the state of the situation or generated by the truth procedure itself when it yields ‘to the desire to name the unnameable’.⁸⁶ This is why Badiou’s subject passionately rejects any involvement in reproducing the existing political ethos: ‘it is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognizes as existent’.⁸⁷ This inaction, however, can only be temporary, because what defines the subject itself is the infinite sequence of acts that link the ‘local order of verification’ to the generic truth through ‘deciding on the undecidable’.⁸⁸ The future generic community manifests itself here and now through resolute emancipatory action that originates in the local situation but opposes and seeks to transcend the latter.

In Agamben’s version, on the contrary, the generic subject *deliberately and conclusively* withdraws from any antagonism, leaving the Master to himself. It will be noted, in particular, that Agamben speaks about the feeling of bankruptcy as rooted in very concrete historical experiences of the twentieth century, which makes his inoperosity a practical solution for the people of our time. To be sure, inoperosity does not amount to passivity and inaction, but what makes praxis inoperative is the absence of any telos or task. Generic emancipation thus consists not in overpowering the Master in the Hegelian manner (potentially replacing one oppressive regime with another), but in subtracting oneself from the order imposed by the sovereign power. This brings back with a vengeance the question that we have already asked in relation to the ‘post-hegemonic’ theories: what happens if the

⁸³ Arditì, ‘Post-Hegemony’, p. 216.

⁸⁴ Ibidem.

⁸⁵ Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, p. 157.

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 114–120. Quote from p. 118.

⁸⁷ Badiou, quoted in Prozorov, ‘Giorgio Agamben’, p. 540.

⁸⁸ Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, pp. 115, 117.

Master, quite simply, refuses to be ignored and goes on to insist that the Slave remains a slave? What if the state, the nation and identitarian politics as such disregard their own bankruptcy and continue to impose themselves on the populations of the world? Agamben and his followers take inspiration in the Deleuzean reading of Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, whose reply to any authority calling upon him to get to work or take any other action was 'I would rather not to'.⁸⁹ The character is indeed not just amusing and invites philosophical reflection, but once we start to literally translate it into political praxis, we face the warning that Melville's narrator issues to Bartleby: 'Either you must do something, or something must be done to you'.⁹⁰ One can always try to fancy an alternative ending to the original story in which poor Bartleby dies in the most pitiful way. Yet doing so would most probably involve moving it to a different social context (the subtitle *A Story of Wall Street* is very meaningful) – and there are hardly any reasons to believe that the twenty-first century capitalism has lost the power of its grip.

It thus seems that the way we conceive of generic politics critically depends on whether subtraction can amount to a withdrawal from the dialectical process which undercuts the authority of the Master by simply ignoring it, or it necessarily involves the need to face the power of the state in order to 'assign a measure' to its excess.⁹¹ Prozorov follows Badiou in differentiating between destruction and subtraction as two possible forms of resistance, and he associates antagonism exclusively with the former.⁹² If this were indeed the case, then both Agamben and Badiou could surely be portrayed as advocates of non-antagonistic politics. I would argue, however, that they promote two distinct understandings of subtraction, and the one present in Badiou's writings clearly retains a strong antagonistic dimension. Badiou himself sums up this disagreement in the following way:

Agamben, this Franciscan of ontology, prefers, to the affirmative becoming of truths, the delicate, almost secret persistence of life, what remains to one who no longer has anything; this forever sacrificed "bare life", both humble and essential, which conveys

⁸⁹ See Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical* (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 68–90; Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Selected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 243–74; Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), pp. 375–85; Prozorov, 'Giorgio Agamben', pp. 535, 540.

⁹⁰ Herman Melville, *Bartleby; and, The Lightning-Rod Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 40.

⁹¹ Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, p. 158.

⁹² Prozorov, 'Giorgio Agamben', pp. 533–35; see also Prozorov, *Ethics of Post-Communism*, pp. 18–22.

everything of which we – crushed by the crass commotion of powers – are capable of in terms of sense.⁹³

What differentiates the two authors is the fact that Badiou's politics strives to transcend the situation by opposing the state in a series of acts whose preconditions are defined by the local context but which nevertheless resist any inclusion by virtue of being true to the revolutionary void of the event. As it is subtractive rather than destructive, it does not make opposing the Master its point of departure, but it is certainly ready to fight if the situation so demands. By contrast, Agamben's subtraction is equivalent to withdrawal: his subject lets the state remain as it is in its irreparable bankruptcy and engages in inoperative praxis which is incomprehensible from within the norms on which sovereign power rests. Whether this amounts to resistance or escapism and depoliticisation might be a question of definition, or simply of taste. Yet this concern must definitely accompany Agamben's political project – very much in the same way as Badiou's project is necessarily self-restrained by the ever-present possibility of forcing the truth into a disaster of evil by naming the unnameable.

Conclusion

This article has critically analysed a number of recent attempts to present theoretical grounds for thinking about a future cosmopolitan community. The key questions that shape the debate boil down to one crucial point: the possibility to conceive of politics that would be free of antagonism and therefore non-exclusionary. It makes no sense to question the existence of a universal human identity and therefore of humankind as a community, which is so visibly present in all types of everyday discourses and practices. However, as soon as we enter the political terrain, the notion of cosmopolitan identity that presupposes no difference at all – either within itself or in the form of exclusion – does not seem to be a logical possibility. This is acknowledged even by liberal universalists such as Arash Abizadeh, who points out several possible ways to conceptualize difference that would not amount to outright exclusion. Firstly, he differentiates between individual and collective identities and suggests that a political community can depend on the recognition by the individuals that belong to it rather than by outsiders. Secondly, he advances the Derridean argument that any identity is dislocated and the difference can actually be contained within the Self. Thirdly and

⁹³ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* (London, New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 559. On the concept of bare life and its political significance, see, inter alia, Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Vaughan-Williams, 'The Generalized Bio-Political Border?'; Prozorov, 'Giorgio Agamben'.

finally, he resorts to the idea of temporal othering and similar forms that do not amount to the exclusion of anyone in particular.

In the final analysis, the rationale of the whole exercise is to demonstrate that, contrary to Carl Schmitt, antagonism is not a definitional feature of politics and thus to substantiate the feasibility of a cosmopolitan political community that is not based on exclusion and negativity. This would probably work against Schmitt, who does after all claim that a political enemy must be a ‘fighting collectivity of people’.⁹⁴ The problem is, however, that poststructuralist political theory, which relies on Schmitt in its understanding of the political, has long time ago reworked this ontology to accommodate insights from structural linguistics and psychoanalysis. This article has demonstrated that, if we redefine antagonism as occurring between political positions rather than groups of individuals, we can conceive of a community whose identity does not depend on the explicit exclusion of any pre-given empirically identifiable group of individuals, but whose political existence nevertheless inevitably produces negative dynamics which results in specific instances of exclusion where concrete individuals are targeted depending on the circumstances. Nazi politics, for example, clearly and unambiguously excluded several concrete groups of individuals, first of all the Jews. An attribute of Stalinism, on the contrary, was the exclusion of ‘the enemies of the people’, an indistinct category that potentially held everyone in its grip, from simple workers and peasants to top party leaders.

The defining moment here consists in the ontological hierarchy that lies at the core of liberal thought. For liberals, the autonomous individual pre-exists any social structures. Poststructuralism, on the contrary, explicitly rejects any pre-given hierarchies, which leaves us with an infinite expanse of differences where no identity enjoys the privilege of existence before others. Since there is no genuine, primary identity that can serve as a starting point for community-building, antagonism remains the only constitutive force in identity politics. At the same time, modern politics as a practice is inherently ideological: it has to rely on the invented reality of solid identities that it postulates. Therefore it constantly engages in security practices that strive to eliminate dislocation and thus inevitably produce relations of enmity and antagonism. If the liberals are unhappy with this image, they have to start their criticism at the ontological level instead of criticising poststructuralist inferences on the basis of an ontology that poststructuralism does not share.

⁹⁴ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 28.

If, on the contrary, we accept the poststructuralist perspective, we must conclude that a cosmopolitan *identity* is impossible, while the only way to imagine a cosmopolitan *community* consists in abandoning identitarian politics altogether. This possibility is suggested in the philosophical writings of Giorgio Agamben and Alain Badiou and explored more explicitly by Sergei Prozorov. In both versions generic emancipation starts with subtraction from the existing order of things, and thus by refusing to associate political subjectivity with any identity whatsoever. The key question that arises in this connection is whether subtraction necessarily amounts to withdrawal, as Agamben's inoperosity seems to suggest, or it can still take the form of purposeful action aimed at transcending the reality, and thus inevitably antagonising at least some elements of the latter. In the first case, there is a danger of making one's political project irrelevant, while the more militant option stands on the verge of reverting back to the Hegelian dialectics and confronting the Master in a frontal antagonism. It must be noted, however, that the most pertinent empirical examples of generic politics, such as the 'Not in Our Name' movement, come into existence through the logic of negativity and visibly antagonize certain segments of the mainstream political space. This evidence is certainly inconclusive, but it shifts the balance in favour of the opinion that genuine political praxis, *in as much as it is generic*, presupposes being prepared for antagonism – simply because the establishment of an inclusive generic community must revolutionize the existing political order, and this rebellion, whatever form it might take, is bound to cause resistance on the part of the Master.