Mass protests as a way to vent popular dissent are not a new phenomenon. Yet, the recent events both in the Arab world and in the U.S. and Europe, where people took the streets to respectively revolt against their corrupt dictators and against capitalist excesses, have placed before us once again the question of such mass mobilizations and their role in society. How do these ‘revolutionary’ moments function with regard to established regimes? Are these protests indeed, as their protagonists claim, ‘authentic’ democratic moments when the demos, in its pure physicality, gathers on a public square? Or should these protests, rather, be seen as temporary anomalies and interruptions of democracy’s regular functioning?

What all recent protesters share is their common stance against instituted powers. Their political activism thrives on an explicit abhorrence of established elites, as manifested by the slogan ‘They don’t represent us!’ of the Occupy and Indignados movements. This combination of rash anti-representational feelings and the apparent dynamic of a pouvoir constituant demands a closer philosophical exploration of the interrelation between representation and constituent power. In fact, the common sentiment among Occupiers and Indignados has clear links to contemporary theories of constituent power. Authors such as Antonio Negri or Andreas Kalyvas strongly emphasize the role of ‘the people’, ‘the multitude’ or ‘the sovereign as constituent power’, they clearly distrust traditional representative procedures, and they call for a more direct role of the demos instead. Thus, for these authors, direct involvement of the people is the normative ideal, whereas democratic representation is equated with an almost Schumpeterian system of institutionalized elite rule that claims to be democratic by virtue of the sheer fact that those in power are subject to regular elections.

Equating representation with institutionalized electoral politics, though, unduly restricts the meaning of the term ‘representation’ and risks overlooking that the dynamics of
collective representation are operating elsewhere as well. Building on post-structuralist insights (as exemplified, for instance, by the work of Jacques Derrida), it can be argued that representative mechanisms are at work whenever people’s collective identities, interests, or preferences are involved. Representation and self-representation, in this view, play an inescapable and ‘constitutive’ role in any type of group process. This more fundamental understanding of representation has recently been pointed to and elaborated on, in different contexts, by several political theorists (Urbinati 2006, Saward 2010, Ankersmit 1996, Disch 2011).

In the first two sections of this paper we will focus, on the one hand, on this ‘constitutive’ understanding of representation (section I), and, on the other hand, on the opposite view that stresses the importance of ‘constituent power’ as a more fundamental, pre-representative vector of democracy (section II). In both cases, we will use the example of the American Declaration of Independence and investigate how this quintessential moment in the history of American democracy is interpreted by authors on both sides of the divide, with Derrida as a figurehead of the constitutive view of representation and Negri as an exemplary proponent of constituent power. The key question, in this regard, is whether the American people is first brought into being by processes of representation, as Derrida famously argues, or whether it can be said to pre-exist the moment of constitution, as Negri tends to claim. In the paper’s final section (III), we will argue that these two accounts cannot be uncoupled and we propose to reinterpret the tension between representation and constituent power as a relation of ‘co-originality’. We demonstrate that the relation between these two poles is circular and resist the view that the dynamics of politics can be captured in the split of a single, foundational moment. Instead, we emphasize the inbuilt temporal dimension of politics.

I. Representation

Various brands of post-structuralism have alternatively described reality as constructed through ‘discourse’, ‘language’, or a ‘symbolic order’ (Stavrakakis 2002: 523). Notwithstanding important ecumenical differences between post-structuralist authors, they all share the belief that our apprehension of reality is mediated by a network of symbolic representations. Rather than merely reflecting reality, these representations are said to ‘constitute’ the reality we live in: they establish how we understand different elements in that
reality and determine how we act in it. Representations, although not literally ‘creating’ reality, weave a net of meaning around objects and thereby determine what these objects are (Hall 1997: 16). Ernesto Laclau gives the rather straightforward example of a stone, which, depending on how it is represented, can appear as a weapon, a piece of trash or a chemical formation (Laclau 1990: 101).

In order to clarify the constitutive nature of representation, theorists often have recourse to aesthetic metaphors (Ankersmit 1996: 23; Saward 2010: 15). Frank Ankersmit, for instance, refers to the practice of art to explicate how our access to reality is mediated by representations. When painting a picture or writing a book, artists do not primarily intend to portray the world as it is. By presenting it in some unique and meaningful way, they rather make the world visible and intelligible to us. Thus, instead of just reflecting the world, art can be said to ‘disclose’ reality (Ankersmit 1996: 45), and shed light on what was somehow dark. Inevitably, this light is a particular light: representations are always partial and never exhaust the full abundance of reality.

This same scheme is also set to work by a number of political theorists (including Ankersmit himself), who interpret the workings of political representation along similar lines. As well as we do not have unmediated access to other realms of reality, understanding political or social reality – and understanding ourselves as part of that reality – is impossible without some form of symbolic mediation. People’s interests, opinions, and political identities are never simply pre-given, but acquire their meaning in processes of collective self-representation. Thus, it is only through representation that we come to comprehend ourselves as a collectivity or as a community. A group of people needs a perspective or a focal point from which it can recognize itself as a collectivity, that is: it needs to be represented as a collectivity in order for it to be a collectivity.

We should not fall into the trap of limiting political representation to the particular zone within the social known as politics. Next to elected members of parliament, union leaders or organizers of student protests can just as well function as political representatives (Saward 2010: 2). Even discourses that are not directly related to political topics can play some role or other in the political self-understanding of a community. It should be clear, then, that the distinction between representation and political representation can never a priori be

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3 Ankersmit calls this the ‘aesthetic gap’ between a representation and the object represented: they can never fully overlap (Ankersmit 1996: 104).

4 Of course, there might be more than one representation involved (and sometimes these representations might conflict), but in general it can be asserted that representations are constitutive for collectivities (Rosanvallon 1998: 38).
fixed. Every representation can play a role in the symbolic constitution of social collectivities and can, in that sense, be a ‘political’ representation.

Thus, to summarize this view: politics does not just reflect, reproduce, or otherwise channel something that already exists elsewhere or outside of politics (Urbinati 2006: 33). In fact, politics plays a pivotal role in constituting the very aspects of reality it is supposed to represent. Or, put differently, political representation precedes that which is represented. In this regard, ‘representation’ – in the sense of collective self-representation – is the very core task of politics. The other, more prosaic functions of politics (the making of collectively binding decisions) are only possible in virtue of the constitutive character of representation, by which, as a consequence, these prosaic functions are conditioned. A variety of authors defend such a scheme, ranging from Rosanvallon (1998), Laclau (1996, 2005), and Ankersmit (1996, 2002) to the more recent work of Saward (2010), Disch (2011), and Hayward (1999).

A prime and clear example of this scheme can be found in Jacques Derrida’s interpretation of the American Declaration of Independence. The stated object of Derrida’s text is to problematize the idea of a ‘foundation’ and to emphasize the impossibility of any ‘foundational’ project. Yet, Derrida’s emphasis on the absence of a genuine ‘foundation’ underneath the famous declaration ‘We the people’ by congressional representatives on the 4th of July 1776, leads straight to the theme of political representation. As Derrida points out, the ‘we’ of the declaration ‘represents’ the people, but this representation can hardly be conceived of as reflecting something that already exists. The ‘we’, in fact, speaks in the name of a non-existing people. Of course, the multitude of persons and groups to which the ‘we’ refers already exists as a physical entity. Yet, this multitude does not exist as the political entity we know as the American people: “it does not exist before this declaration, not as such” (Derrida 1986: 10).

The Declaration purportedly speaks in the name of the people, that is, it ‘represents’ them, yet in actual fact it creates that which it represents. Just as the signature creates the signer (Derrida’s preferred metaphor), the people are first created by the declaration they purportedly author. This effect – by which the signature creates the signer, the declaration the people, and, more generally, the representation the represented – is only possible thanks to a mixture of performative and constative elements within a representative claim. (Derrida 2002, 49). As a matter of fact, the performative and the constative are so much intertwined that it

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5 Derrida further develops this theme in his text on *Force of Law* where he discusses Benjamin’s *Critique on Violence*, Derrida: 1992.
becomes impossible to differentiate between them. This, according to Derrida, is the precondition for the sought after ‘constitutive effect’ (Honig 1991: 106).

At this point we should pause and ask ourselves whether this is a correct description of what goes on during moments of ‘foundation’ or ‘revolution’ or radical new beginnings. Can the foundation of a new political order indeed find its origin in nothing else but a constative/performative representative claim, made – for instance – in the form of a declaration? Undoubtedly, that claim is a crucial element; but it is hardly the whole story. In Derrida’s picture, Thomas Jefferson and his co-signatories almost appear as a political version of Baron Munchausen, who – as the story goes – successfully saved himself (as well as his horse) from a swamp by pulling himself by the hair. The external point of support, which is comically absent in the Munchausen story, is similarly underdeveloped in Derrida’s account of political representation. It is physically impossible to pull oneself up by one’s own hair because the object exercising power and the object upon which power is exercised are one and the same. It is similarly implausible to create a people or a political order simply by making a representation of them. If this were possible, it is unclear why Jefferson and his companions succeeded in producing a new political order and why I, writing a similar declaration in my office today, would not muster the same effect. We need to know why certain representations are ‘constitutive’ and why others are definitely not. What explains why some representations resonate and heat up passions, while others are not even noticed? The answer can definitely not be found in the act of representation alone. The fact that some representations are heard and broadly accepted, while others are not, betrays the presence of outside powers on which successful representations depend, and which cannot be created by these representations themselves. This, then, points to a blind spot in Derrida’s description of the mechanism of representation, namely, what is usually discussed under the label ‘constituent power’.

II. Constituent Power

Our understanding of the term ‘constituent power’ can be traced back to the great democratic revolutions in France and America. It is the distinction between constituent and constituted power, coined by Sieyès, that allowed in France for a new way of legitimating political authority (Sieyès 1789). The ultimate source of governmental power was now embodied by the will of the people, rather than by the divine rights of the monarch. In using the term
‘constituent power’, one refers to the power through which a political community is able to institute itself and organize itself politically.

Such a definition puts constituent power in sharp opposition to ‘constituted power’, and yet the exact relation between both terms is never entirely clear and remains subject to theoretical debate. Since the people’s power “can only be exercised through constitutional forms already established”, the relation between constituent and constituted power remains, as some call it, a “paradox of constitutionalism” (Loughlin & Walker 2007).

One way to deal with this paradox is to stress the ‘autonomy’ of constituent power. Some authors do indeed claim that constituent power has an independent status and precedes all forms of constituted power and representation. This view is for example captured in Schmitt’s claim that “the concrete existence of the politically unified people is prior to every norm” (Schmitt 2008: 166). Kalyvas, partly building on Schmitt, also sees constituent power as an autonomous force, yet he considers it as a temporary phenomenon, an exceptional phase that has its telos in the constituted order (Kalyvas 2005, 233). Negri is more radical and describes the free and self-organizing dynamic of constituent power as a permanent force that continually opposes the order of representation (Negri 1999). In what follows, we will look at Antonio Negri’s interpretation of the American Revolution and the role of the Declaration of Independence in that revolution. Negri’s interpretation provides a useful contrast with Derrida’s, and might help us to get a more solid grasp of what exactly is at stake in contemporary discussions about constituent power.

According to Negri, the American Revolution is one of the clearest examples of constituent power at work. The democratic revolution as it unfolded in the years before and after the Declaration, Negri writes, should by no means be understood as a process that merely took place at the level of ideas or discourse. Instead, Negri emphasizes the material character of this revolution. As the old order started to show cracks, a network of new revolutionary associations and groups was formed. Of particular importance in this regard is the moment when the colonies started to recruit militias. Here, Negri says, we deal with the very core of constituent power: the people in arms who organize themselves in a mostly decentralized and horizontal way and who, if necessary, are willing to declare war to their enemies. At such moments, a “new constitutional order” and a new beginning based on radically different principles becomes possible (Negri 1999: 147). The self-organization in militias and other associations is not only the announcement of this new constitutional order, but also the first, concrete manifestation of it.
For Negri, the subsequent Declaration of Independence explicitly limits the space of British legitimacy, and thus in a way separates a new space from another. Yet the space claimed by the Declaration is neither empty nor created by the act of the Declaration itself:

> It is a space already widely filled by the radical democratic activity that is behind and inspires these pages [of the Declaration], and by the imagining, on this basis, of a movement of constituent power that comes before any constitution. It is a dense movement of rupture and innovation, not a different function in the continuity of the juridical, political, and ideological history of the United States. (Negri 1999: 151)

This quote makes clear how, according to Negri, constituent power cannot be found in the text of the constitution but essentially *precedes* the Constitution. Constituent power, in other words, cannot be explained from the order it constitutes but always escapes that order, in that it simultaneously comes before and surpasses that order. Constituent power, for Negri, coincides with the radical democratic self-organization of society, that is, with – literally – the ‘people in arms’. Constituent power simply *is* the revolution. In Negri’s usage, constituent power refers to those rare moments in history when a diffuse crowd storms the centre of power (the Bastille, the Winter Palace) and obliterates it, in what looks like a spontaneous, horizontal movement driven by “an ethical impulse and a constructive passion” (Negri 1999: 22).

For Negri, these radical moments of constituent power are the very essence of democracy: “to speak of constituent power is to speak of democracy”. Constituent power, democracy and revolution – all of which are synonyms, according to Negri – are moments of what he calls ‘absolute government’. Absolute government stands in opposition to the forms of limited government which any constitution imposes. A constitutionally limited government limits democracy because it limits constituent power, says Negri (1999: 2, 157). The very purpose of a constitution is to tame constituent power by incorporating it into the constitutional machine and into the mechanisms of representation (Negri 1999: 12). Eventually, constituent power is no longer recognized as the *cause*, but is rather presented as the *product* of the constitution and of the representative institutions.

The contrast with Derrida’s perspective could hardly be greater. What Derrida describes is, in the eyes of Negri, the first betrayal of the original constituent power which actually enabled Jefferson to write and successfully proclaim the Declaration. From there, we can only expect a further process of perversion or alienation, that is, we can only move further away from the original constituent power to which the Declaration fruitlessly points. In contrast to Derrida, Negri believes that representation is not constitutive but, rather,
essentially oppressive. In Negri’s view, representation does not open anything, but rather restricts a potentially unlimited field of possibilities to the limits of this particular politico-juridical order or constitution. As such, Negri’s account of constituent power seems able to avoid and unmask what we described as a ‘blind spot’ in Derrida’s reading of the Declaration.

Yet, by glorifying constituent power and rejecting any constituted order or institutionalized representation, Negri ends up with a rather implausible picture of politics. For Negri, politics should be an unmediated expression of the multitude and “the continual creation of a new world of life […]”. The question, though, is whether such a conception of politics is workable beyond the momentary character of the insurrection. Can politics really be a “dynamic, creative, continual, and procedural constitution of strength”? And should constituted power really be seen as an effect of dead labor, “a perverse inversion of constituent power” (Negri 1999: 334)? Is Negri thereby not needlessly reducing politics to the specific moment of revolution and, in doing so, offering an all too limited understanding of politics?

Both Derrida and Negri propose a particular picture of the relationship between constituent power and representation. For Derrida, the represented comes after the representation. For Negri, in contrast, the represented comes before the representation. If we follow Derrida’s line of thought, it becomes quite unclear why certain representations gain popular support and are indeed able to constitute new political orders. Negri, by contrast, shows us that the ability of the people to organize itself forms the constituent power on which any successful representation must build. Yet, Negri remains mostly silent about how this self-organization operates, and about how it may endure over time. Processes of representation seemingly play no part in it. For Negri, groups or collectivities arise almost automatically or naturally, and are able to maintain themselves in that same spontaneous manner.

The philosophical challenge, then, is to understand and conceptualize the connection between representation and constituent power. What we are aiming at is an understanding of the extent to which democratic constituent power – the people – does not exist prior to its representation and, inversely, of the extent to which representations depend on – always need to be supported by – constituent power. Identifying this circular movement between constituent power and representation enables us to put into question the somewhat naïve claims by those thinkers, such as Antonio Negri, who believe that constituent power can be generated and maintained without the detour of representative mechanisms. At the same time, focusing on this relation of mutual dependence prevents us from falling into a formalist
account that would overlook the role of constituent power and take representation to be a mere matter of ‘declarations’, of ‘discourse’, or of institutionalized procedures.

III. Co-originality

If we put Derrida’s and Negri’s interpretations of the Declaration next to each other, ‘representation’ and ‘constituent power’ appear as competing, almost mutually exclusive concepts. In contrast to this approach, we believe that representation and constituent power should be thought of as co-originalt. Looking deeper into the formation of constituent power and spelling out what really happens when ‘constituent power’ emerges, the role of representation in that process inevitably comes to the fore. Inversely, representations of the people (or parts thereof) cannot be established completely at will and depend on powers that can never be totally captured in the constituted order, that is: any representation of ‘the people’ depends on ‘constituent power’. In other words, we believe that representation and constituent power are internally connected and in fact mutually presuppose each other. This not only holds for the specific context of new beginnings and moments of foundation: in fact, the constant interplay between constituent power and representation forms a characteristic feature of any political process. Aspects of this thesis have already been analyzed by different authors, such as Lefort, Laclau, and Latour. In the remainder of this paper, we try to systematize their insights by elucidating the circular connection between representation and constituent power along the three following axes.

III.1 The discursive embeddedness of constituent power

In his description of the revolutionary moments of American history, Negri strongly emphasizes the role of militias and spontaneous self-organization. The formation of power is reduced here to an almost organic process, driven by physical forces and burning desires.

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6 We borrow the term ‘co-originality’ from Jürgen Habermas, who, in Faktizität und Geltung, demonstrates that private autonomy (as protected by individual rights and typically emphasized in the liberal tradition) and public autonomy (or ‘popular sovereignty’, a concept Habermas associates with the tradition of civic republicanism) do not necessarily conflict or compete with each other, as is often assumed. In fact, Habermas shows, private and public autonomy mutually presuppose each other, that is, they are ‘co-original’ (’gleichursprünglich’) (Habermas 1996: 84-104; cf. Rummens 2006). Our paper clearly deals with a different topic, yet the connection we wish to draw between ‘representation’ and ‘constituent power’ formally resembles the connection Habermas sees between private and public autonomy.
What remains out of sight is the extent to which the formation of militias, the organization of rebellion and the evocation of passion and desire depend on specific discursive achievements. If individuals are willing to act together with others, it is because they believe they share certain goals, interests or values with these others, and because they recognize themselves as members of that particular group. Thus, the formation of a collectivity is never the result of a mere organic or natural process but, on the contrary, situates itself on the level of symbolic interaction. The notion of the discursive or the symbolic used here stands close to Wittgenstein’s concept of a language game in which meaning and material practices are inseparably intertwined and can only be analytically separated retrospectively and up to a certain extent (Laclau 1990: 100-101).

Accordingly, the way the revolutionaries organize themselves in militias and form a constituent, revolutionary power cannot be separated from the concrete discourses through which they are generated. Revolutionary actors look at themselves not simply from their own perspective, but they rather see themselves as one element or member of a larger group, and this perspective – pace Negri – is typically constructed in discourse. To be more precise, it arises in ‘political’ discourses, that is, discourses in which grievances are expressed, values are professed, or collective projects and action coordination problems are discussed. What is ultimately at stake in such political discourses – whether implicitly or explicitly – is the self-representation of a collectivity and/or the way one perceives oneself within that collectivity.

This argument leads to an obvious conclusion, namely: the emergence of constituent power presupposes a successful process of collective self-representation(s). Strictly speaking, that process does not require formal procedures of political representation and it can take place, as Negri clearly hopes, in horizontal interactions between all actors concerned. Such a process of collective self-representation can be identified with a broad range of acts, from shouting slogans to being elected as a leader. Yet, this is a profoundly symbolic process. In fact, it is because a ‘name’ or a set of common denominators is established that a group first comes to recognize itself as a group and, accordingly, can exercise its collective power. Otherwise, there simply is no unified group aware of its own potential, with clear needs, articulate demands, or a shared revolutionary project. In other words, a representation has to be established: more precisely, the representation of a group which, in the actual facts, does not exist as such.

At the same time, this emphasis on the role of collective self-representation in the emergence of constituent power should not mislead us into overestimating the power of representations – as Derrida seems to do. When trying to speak in the name of a group, or
when trying to establish a form of collective representation, one cannot just say anything. French theorist Claude Lefort, in his 1972 book on Machiavelli, uses the metaphor of interpretation to explain the workings and limitations of political speech. According to Lefort, the role of a political subject – a ‘prince’ – consists in ‘reading’ or ‘interpreting’ social reality. Social and political facts do not carry their meaning within them. There always remains an uncertainty with regard to how one should understand the current state of society. It is precisely the recognition of this ‘indeterminacy’, Lefort states, which makes politics possible and necessary in the first place (Lefort 1972: 426, 435). As social relations do not carry their signification within them, political subjects have to ‘read’ them and provide an interpretation of them. Yet they cannot simply fabricate their meaning. Politics is not an arbitrary matching of facts and meaning – one cannot make out of the events whatever one wants. Instead, politics is a careful ‘deciphering’ of every situation (Lefort 1972: 427, 433). In that process of deciphering, one is limited by the possibilities that are present within the ‘social material’ one is interpreting – just as the interpretation of a book or a work of art allows for considerable freedom, without allowing for just any interpretation. Indeed, as well as it is possible to distinguish between better and worse interpretations of a text (without succumbing to the illusion that there is only one good interpretation, or to the illusion that the text’s meaning is objectively encrypted within its words), so too a political representation can be better or worse, can be more or less successful. The better representation, within a specific political context, will be the one that finds its bearings in the images and ideas that are already present in the field that one is interpreting. This explains why certain proposals of collective self-representation do find support, while others are destined to remain Munchausen-like shots in the dark.

In sum, then, both Negri and Derrida overlook an element of what we could call ‘the discursive embeddedness’ of constituent power. Negri, if not completely overlooks, at least unduly minimizes the discursive element in the formation of constituent power. In this regard, Negri gives us a very incomplete picture of how a revolution functions and develops. Although it is certainly true that new and spontaneous forms of association are born during revolutionary periods, it seems inaccurate to claim that this happens independently of processes of representation. It is probably more correct to speak of a chaotic and creative explosion of different representations which, in a first instance, lack a clear centre or unity. There can be a space of radical democratic practices, but that space is still constructed by and suffused with multiple forms of collective self-representation. At the same time, however, we should not overestimate the power of representations as Derrida seems to do. A representation
is always an interpretation of something actually happening out there. That is why not any representation at any time will do. Establishing a successful representation requires a keen insight into the actual, underlying social process. It is probably at this point that the successful politician distinguishes herself from the less successful one. If politics is to be conceived as a practice of interpretation, there has to be something that can be interpreted. At the same time, it should be emphasized that this ‘something’ – in contrast to what Negri suggests – cannot lie outside the symbolic realm, but is on the contrary always already constituted by this order.

### III.2 From division to unity (and back)

A revolutionary process wherein the constituent power of the people is manifested entails a process of unification. In order for isolated demands, claims, or grievances to debouch into a resonating call to get rid of the old order, they somehow need to be unified. The chaotic and scattered moments of collective representation that characterize (pre-)revolutionary situations must be brought together under a signifier through which the different associations, militias, and groups are able to perceive themselves as part of one and the same revolutionary wave. In the case of the American Revolution, different social and political demands were gradually bundled under common denominators such as ‘the people’ or ‘independence’. Out of a diversity of struggles a unity was articulated that eventually recognized and named itself in the act of the Declaration. Theoretically, this process of unification can be spelled out as follows.

In a pre-revolutionary period, a variety of groups exists with different requests. To the extent that the institutional system is unable to fulfill these demands, individuals or groups with different demands are likely to develop a vague kind of solidarity, founded on their shared dissatisfaction with the institutional system. At this stage, the chain connecting the separate demands is still vague and vulnerable; it lacks a clear centre or a common project and is purely negative in nature: unity is produced through what is commonly rejected (Laclau 2005: 73-74).

What might happen next, is that one demand within this chain of equivalent demands (or what Laclau calls the ‘equivalential chain’) becomes the common denominator which embodies the whole series of demands, and which thus comes to represent the totality. In the case of the American Revolution, this role was obviously played by the demand for independence. Of course, this does not imply that the difference between heterogeneous
demands is suddenly erased. Different demands remain distinct, yet the notion of ‘independence’ – as the unifying concept – binds them together. Independence is portrayed as the solution to all pressing social or political problems of the moment. As such, the literal meaning of independence is transformed into a symbolic one; independence comes to stand for hope, a coming community, and progress in general. Independence becomes a shared horizon in which existing and new demands can be phrased in a plausible manner.

Within this process, the literal meaning of independence is hollowed out, and independence becomes so to speak an ‘empty signifier’: it becomes, in other words, a symbol which represents and canalizes all revolutionary energies. At the same time, it is clear that this one demand cannot incorporate the totality or universality of all demands. It really is just one particular demand among many, and there are no reasons to assume that fulfilling it will necessarily lead to the fulfillment of all other demands. Yet, this process of unification, in which all demands are felt to be absorbed by one single demand, is necessary, as it allows a wide range of revolutionary actors to recognize themselves as part of one and the same movement pushing in one single direction.

The tension between unity and multiplicity can also be explained in reference to Lefort’s account of social conflict. According to Lefort, human societies, although intrinsically conflicting, are also in continuous need of unity. The role of politics, for Lefort, is precisely the establishment of symbolic unity in conditions of endemic conflict. His primary example is Machiavelli’s prince, who embodies an image of unity in a community that is torn between two irreconcilable desires: the Grandi’s desire to rule and the people’s desire not to be ruled. The irreconcilability of the conflict implies that any unifying representation will be temporary, as it is dependent upon the contingent equilibrium between both desires. At the same time, both desires, however divergent and incompatible they may be, are inextricably bound to each other, i.e., they are only possible within one and the same (representational) unity. The Grandi can only desire to rule if they belong to a community where they can rule over a people who recognizes them as Grandi and as potential rulers. Inversely, the people can only desire not to be ruled if they are part of a community that is potentially ruled by Grandi (Lefort 1972: 434). If either the Grandi or the people were permitted to fully satisfy their respective desires, they would cease to be what they are. To be sure, Lefort’s story is not identical to Laclau’s. Yet, once again, it becomes clear that multiplicity and unity – constituent forces and collective self-representation – cannot possibly be disentangled.
III.3 Constituent Power and the Repetitive Process of Representation

What this circular connection between constituent power and representation ultimately points to is that representation can never be a finished product, but it always has the character of a process. The constitution of a group by means of representation is never a given: it always has to be started all over again. As Bruno Latour puts it, the unification of the social has a ‘repetitive character’. In Latour’s view, every ‘assembling’ of the social is bound to become a ‘reassembling’ of the social, as any such ‘assemblage’ is only momentary. It spontaneously withers away unless it is reiterated, re-enacted. Even if one tries to stabilize the assemblage by building long-lasting institutions, these institutions themselves will always be in need of reworking and renewal. Moreover, the individuals themselves, as well as their mutual relations, are constantly changing. As a result, a successful attempt to give the group a stable, determinate meaning at one moment, might be discredited the next moment when the group’s composition, the self-image of its members, or the dynamics of their mutual relations, have changed (Latour 2003: 148).

This necessity to continuously reiterate the unity of the group and impose a stable interpretation upon it, is likely to create opportunities for resistance. That is, gaps can appear, and elements of ‘constituent power’ currently not incorporated in (dominant) forms of collective self-representation might start to express themselves. This process, in which representations are permanently renewed and challenged by new manifestations of constituent power, is necessarily without end. It is reminiscent of Sisyphus’s predicament.

To further complicate things, it could be added that even the constituent power that is aimed against the dominant form(s) of collective self-representation, can function as a point of support and hence strengthen that self-representation. For if that self-representation successfully maintains itself against these counter-powers and continues to be recognized as a genuine form of collective self-representation, its legitimacy is likely to increase. Thus, in this regard as well, representation can be said to be in need of constituent power and requires a continuous confrontation with constituent power. Inversely, these ‘insurgent’ constituent power.

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7 Consider e.g. the organization of the production process in society. This is done by public institutions and private institutions (or combinations of both). Yet, no matter by whom or by which means production is organized, the constantly changing nature of the social forces these institutions to re-organize themselves continually. Every assembling of the social in order to organize production is a constant re-assembling. The change over the last forty years from fordism to post-fordism is a paradigmatic example of such a process of assembling/re-assembling.
powers cannot but be ‘symbolic’. These powers have to make use of existing interpretations and/or offer a newer or better interpretation if they want to be heard at all.

This dynamics, in which representations constantly provoke the emergence of constituent powers, implies that there can be fissures and eventually complete ruptures in the field of representations. Although representatives can be said to ‘create’ the people, representatives never fully ‘control’ the meaning attributed to this denominator. The represented can always reject the image that is being established. They can refuse to adopt it as an adequate depiction of their collectivity, they can prefer another, competing representation, or they can simply stop recognizing themselves as members of the collectivity.

In other words, there is a constant threat of disunity, of fraction, and disintegration (Latour 2003: 149). As soon as this disunity becomes manifest and uncontrollable, the representative or the representation is experienced as an oppressive, dominating force towards which obedience or loyalty becomes problematic. As successful forms of constituent power get completely detached from the dominant representation(s), moments of protest, revolt, or full-blooded revolution might ensue.

Is this not how the American Revolution must be understood? And maybe even how any political order, with its constant need for reproduction, must be understood? A revolution is, of course, the most radical reaction to a failure of an existing representation; it “occur[s] at the moment when the transcendence of power vanishes, and when its symbolic efficacy is destroyed” (Lefort 1988: 92). What initially happened in the United States was a process of disintegration whereby the British Crown could no longer uphold the image of itself as a legitimate political order. The representation of the American colonies as part of the British Empire was no longer able to successfully renew itself. This created a new space in which the longing for a more ‘appropriate’ political order could develop in a radical way. Negri thus has a point when he considers constituent power to be the drive that manifests itself in the creation of new forms of life, spontaneous associations, and armed struggle. This is indeed the moment of constituent power which precedes the establishment of a new, stable representation. Yet, constituent power does not situate itself beyond or outside the logic of representation: it is a reaction to a failed form of representation, and the anticipation of a new kind of representation. It is part of a continuous circle of representation. Every representation contains the seeds of new manifestations of constituent power, and constituent power is nothing but the anticipation towards a newly constituted order out of discontent with the former one. The two cannot be separated – although this is what both Negri and Derrida seem to try: they pause at certain points in the circle, yet without looking at the circle as a whole.
Bibliography


