

Desiccated Determinism: A Reappraisal of Self-Determination Beyond National Sovereignty

Povzetek

Izsušeni determinizem: Ponovna ocena samoodločbe onkraj nacionalne suverenosti

Pojem "samoodločba" se pojavlja v ustanovitvenih mednarodnopravnih dokumentih in v ustavah večine držav kot vzvod legitimnosti države in nadnacionalne ureditve. Toda njegova natančna definicija in parametri so predmet razprave – tako v primeru, ko se o njem razpravlja v okviru logike sistema države, kakor tudi zunaj nje. Članek na podlagi kritične politične teorije razkriva "rizomatsko" razumevanje samoodločbe, pri čemer rahlja odnos do sistema države in pojma suverenosti. Članek nato obravnava štiri primere, s katerimi pokaže, kako je mogoče s tem konceptom razumeti možnosti, ki so jih ustvarila sedanja politična gibanja. Te možnosti so manifestacije neizmerne konstitutivne moči in kolektivne imaginacije, ki je sprostila nove vektorje političnih možnosti.

Ključne besede: samoodločba, rizom, sistem države, suverenost, politična gibanja

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Abstract

The notion of "self-determination" is enshrined in the founding documents of international law and most state constitutions as a means of legitimating the current state and supranational order. However, its precise definition and parameters are the subject of debate—both when understood from within the logic of the state system as well as from outside it. This article aims to unearth a "rhizomatic" reading of self-determination, informed by critical political theory, wherein its particular relationship to the state system and the total notion of sovereignty is relaxed. The article then applies this thinking to four case studies in order to demonstrate how this conception can help to understand the possibilities created by recent political

movements as manifestations of boundless constitutive power and collective imagination that unleash new vectors of political possibility.

Keywords: self-determination, rhizome, state system, sovereignty, political movements

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Introduction

*Alone,
I alone am the air and the golden butter,
linden bark, the king, the sickle and hammer,
the Dalmatian, the saw, Armenia, the key,
alone.*

- From "Alone" by Tomaž Šalamun
Translated by Brian Henry

Today, few would argue openly that humans should not govern themselves, but we can hardly agree on what that actually means. Discussion about this problem centers on the principle of "self-determination", the evocative notion of political order originating from, and remaining subservient to, those it applies to; however, although "self-determination" is referenced widely in today's (post-)modern context, its definition, and certainly also its rules, remain vague. In this article, I will propose a theoretical framework to locate the parameters of what "self-determination" might mean, arguing that it can encompass political ideas that lie beyond what the closed logic of the state system implies.

The notion of "self-determination" is enshrined in the founding documents of international law and most modern state constitutions as a means of legitimating the current state and supranational order. The logic is that because each political community has exercised a right to determine its own system of laws and norms, there exists a pseudo-contractual relationship between state authorities and the communities they represent, and those authorities may in turn negotiate internationally on behalf of those citizens. However, the state-based vision of self-determination has a problem. What if the bounds of some individual or collective "self" do not correspond to those of the state? What if an individual or group rejects the moment of birth and civic socialization as sufficient basis for contractual "determination"? At what point does inclusion in a representative, hie-

rarchical, and absolute political order constitute domination and coercion rather than consent and self-rule?

This problem is widely recognized. Many contemporary thinkers, across a wide spectrum of disciplines, have highlighted the problems of defining the boundaries of these communities and adjudicating criteria for inclusion or exclusion. Yet, with extremely marginal exception, all habitable territory on earth is currently controlled—at least formally—by a state, and new or unrecognized claims to sovereign self-determination in a particular territory thus must be subtractions from a state’s jurisdictional authority. Therefore, while a *right* to self-determine might be central to the legitimation of the current state order, any new moments of its application are fraught with crisis.

Most of the extant literature about this tension attempts to adjudicate “legitimate” and “non-legitimate” claims to sovereign self-determination on the *de jure* basis of the state system. This forms the basis by which most secession movements active today claim legitimacy. But what happens when we look beyond the constraints of the sovereign state order in search of a different notion of self-determination? A critical perspective emerges, which holds that entirely new ontologies, values, and subjectivities may emerge spontaneously, bringing with them previously inconceivable ideas about political collectivity. From this perspective, it is precisely these moments, not necessarily the emergence of new states, that are the moments of political creation we might otherwise think of as “self-determination”.

For ease, I will term this strain of thinking “rhizomatic”, and will discuss why in greater detail later. However, my central claim is that these rhizomatic understandings of political agency can offer something important to the academic, legal, and philosophical discussions of what constitutes “political self-determination”. Without considering ideas that view the nature of self-determination as multiple and constitutive, invocations of political self-determination are to be understood within the particular, hierarchical context of the state system, and are thus either imperfect claims of autonomy, subject to all the same challenges of membership and domination therein, or are moments of secession. This means illegality and violence, resolved only by the constituted power of the state system—moments that preserve the current state structure, realize the hegemonic aims of already powerful states, or validate a deployment of effective violence. In effect, self-determination is then a concept that enshrines not normative and creative self-determination but rather a retrograde *determinism* of force.

This main body of this article will be divided into Parts 2, 3, and 4. Part 2 will address the concept of sovereign self-determination as it is currently understood within the legal structure of the current state system. Part 3

will present a “rhizomatic” vision of political self-determination in which the concept is decoupled from its association with the state system and reference an epistemology laid out mostly by 20th and 21st century critical theorists. Part 4 will present four case studies of recent political movements, each of which models in some way this “rhizomatic” conception of political self-determination.

In a contemporary moment when the global state system and economy is beset by forceful challenges from all sides (including, sometimes, from within the very states that created it), perhaps now is the time to revisit our understanding of political self-determination. Broadening what we consider to be political self-determination, we may also be able to imagine ways to transform our own future. Must self-determination be, as it is understood from within the state system, defined by territorial claims of sovereign agency for a bounded political community? Or might it also be understood as something more radically creative?

Sovereign Self-Determination and the State System

Before considering how political self-determination might be understood beyond its relationship to the state, I will first examine its place within the logic of the international system. In doing so, I will demonstrate the deep tensions created within the hierarchical logic of the state by the idea of self-determination, even as it is defined and applied by state actors (or those aspiring to become state actors). Its centrality is, of course, partially the product of a particular historical trajectory of political ideas and outcomes, but it is far from a litigated relic from a long-ago past. Instead, it serves a central role as a conceptual means to continually legitimate the system as it exists today, linking the concept of self-rule and representative democracy to the nation-state formation and defense of its sovereignty by means of an imagined contract of consent at some earlier moment of “self-determination” between each human political subject and their state.

Self-Determination as a Principle of International Law

The history of self-determination as a principle—like the history of the state system itself—is a particular one, colored by evolving legal norms, historical outcomes, and the individual ideas of influential political actors. Article 1 of the United Nations (UN) Charter most famously articulates the “classical” vision of self-determination that is enshrined in international law as a legal norm that exists to this day. In it, one of the most fundamental roles of the UN is to “develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples” (United Nations, 1945). This terminology—that of self-determining *peoples* and relations among *nations*—represents the cross-pollination of two particular European political histories. On the one hand, it gestures to concepts of representative self-rule as developed in antiquity, and repackaged by Renaissance thinkers and Enlightenment-era revolutionaries, and on the other, the parallel trajectory of communitarian justifications of national sovereignty resurrected during the period of nationalist revival movements in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. Though the membrane between these two political histories is certainly permeable, their collision in the classical principle of self-determination is a particular result of several centuries of interplay between these political ideas and historical outcomes.

Wolfgang Danspeckgruber traces the underlying principles of consent and self-rule expressed in the UN Charter to the American and French revolutions (Danspeckgruber, 2002: 4). This also entails the influence of republican and neoclassical ideas that inspired revolutionary thinkers, wherein the legitimation of state law, policy, and leadership derives solely from electoral participation rather than divine mandate. However, elsewhere, the familiar challenges of defining “popular” representation, delineating the boundaries of a people, and of conferring political subjectivity meant that institutions could then be created based on co-opted, misrepresented, or invented civic mandates and robust structures of colonial conquest maintained with nominal legitimacy. National movements, as they emerged, offered an alternative path unencumbered by these tensions. Benedict Anderson argues that, already by the time of the French Revolution, most “key concepts were understood globally – progress, liberalism, socialism, republicanism, democracy, even conservatism, legitimacy and later fascism,” but that nationalism was a poorly defined idea with little philosophical basis, which could only be understood “comparatively and globally”, and could only be felt and politically operationalized by those under the influence of a particular strain of it (Anderson, 1996: 2).

After the catastrophic collisions of nationalism and empire in the First World War, new projects of interstate coordination like the League of Nations were pursued to forestall more bloodshed. To peacefully adjudicate claims of statehood, questions of membership and mandate needed to be solved. This was a crucial moment for what became the “pre-classical” principle of self-determination: the explicit embrace of nationhood as grounds for sovereignty, *alongside* self-rule as a consented compact of civic mandate. Antonio Cassese (1995) credits American President Woodrow Wilson with the international elevation of the cause of national self-determination, and identifies this as the moment where notions of the popular civic mandate entered the formula. Cassese writes that, for Wilson, “self-determination was the logical corollary of popular sovereignty; it was synonymous with the principle that governments must be based on the ‘consent of the governed’” (Cassese, 1995: 19). This consent was to be secured within states based on ethno-national community membership, which either guaranteed the rights of bounded minorities or were to be restructured to turn minorities into majorities—based on the claims advanced by these communities themselves. Yet, Ivor Jennings (1956) famously decried this as a “ridiculous” means to govern the restructuring of the entire interwar state system: “On the surface, it seemed reasonable: let the people decide. It was in fact ridiculous, because the people cannot decide until someone decides who are the people.” (Jennings, 1956: 55–56)

Next, this “pre-classical” model of self-determination—self-rule, within a bounded area of territorial sovereignty, conferred on an ethno-national basis to those who the extant states of the world order deemed deserving—was to transform from the influential position of the American President to a set of international norms undergirding the entire state system. Although the interwar order was unable to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War, “the self-determination of peoples” returned in the documents founding the United Nations and its subsequent scope after the war. They omitted explicitly ethnic, national, or minority-based conceptions of validating statehood, but the residue of nationalism was thick in the initial moments of “self-determination” that created many of the states that created the norm. And thus, even though the norm of self-determination’s formal linkages with the concept of “nationhood” are severed in the classical model, the ethno-national foundations of most modern states make it exceptionally difficult to disentangle many claims of sovereign nationality from that of sovereign statehood even to the present day.

In the intervening decades, even as the classical principle of self-determination was invoked as the basis for decolonization, written into new UN

documents, and recognized as a core norm of international law time and again, the logical tensions that afflict it have limited the creation of new instances of its legal application to adjudicate claims of statehood. If new or unrecognized invocations of self-determination as the grounds for recognition of an independent state amount to claims of secession (and, if we accept that almost all habitable territory on earth is controlled by a state, then new or unrecognized claims that entail a territorial dimension must be), they pose a major problem. After all, within a system foundationally structured to protect the territorial sovereignty of the existing regime of nation-states, does it make sense to construe a foundational norm as one that *allows* for that sovereignty to be contested? From that angle, self-determination as a legal norm for state creation appears to be an existential contradiction for the entire system it sits within.

Self-Determination and the Legitimation of the State System

Surely the international legal norm, in all its implied power to fuel emergent claims of secession, strikes a discordant tension with the inviolable norm of state sovereignty. Yet, at the same time, the principle of self-determination lives another life: it cannot be ignored or omitted because it is necessary to sustain the state system's legitimacy and cohesion. As Weller writes, "governments have an interest in perpetuating the legitimizing myth of statehood based on an exercise of the free will of the constituents of the state—their own legitimacy depends on it" (Weller, 2008: 14). In this sense, self-determination plays a key role in this "creation myth", and in its absence, the state formation itself appears illegitimate.

To understand why, it is useful to examine a logic that largely follows the histories I sketched out earlier. If the state is both sovereign and the sole arbiter of coercion and private ownership within its territory, its legitimacy must come from somewhere. Without the logic of divine mandate that underpinned centuries of feudalism, it must then derive legitimation from some relationship with the people that it calls citizens. Otherwise, it would constitute a naked exercise of domination.

In one conception, that of the civic popular mandate, the state relationship is characterized by contractual consent. The founding document, a constitution, creates the state and, in some cases, creates the people. Membership is secured by acceding to the contract, either by birth and civic socialization within the common institutions of the state, or by meeting criteria established by the state and swearing an oath—"rebirth" by naturalization. The founding act bounds and determines the governance arrange-

ment of the collective “self”, and acts of naturalization extend those boundaries and indicate acceptance of the representative governance arrangement by those who recreate themselves as members of the community. At its founding, this is something more radical, creative, and revolutionary than, for example, securing an arrangement of autonomous self-government from a willing monarch who reserves the right to revoke any powers he or she sees fit. Rather, it inverts the logic of legitimacy, which now rests temporally in the moment of contractual consent: the moment of self-determination.

In the nationalist conception, questions of boundedness and membership morph into something fixed and explicitly ethno-cultural. Yet, the representational mechanisms of state legitimation are similar. The *people*, which already exists, decides how it is to be represented by the state, and the state thus derives its legitimation from the primary national community it embraces. Minorities are to be afforded rights of autonomy (though not sovereignty), and usually only if they cannot be assigned their own state and thus transformed into a majority nation. This conception is less explicitly contractual, but in practice, it entails the acceptance of a similar representationalism because the process of formalizing membership occurs as the institutions are constructed. In effect, establishing the regime of governance constitutes the moment of self-determination in this reading as well.

At this point in the logic, where all states represent contracts of self-determination and all territory on earth is perfectly divided, states can now begin to build a supranational order that represents a second level of contractual consent. For, until now, all states are bound simply by the arrangements they have concluded with the citizens of the political community they represent. Now, if the terms of their contract allow and they deem it in the interest of their citizens, they can begin to bind their actions on the basis of an international legal order. If a state trades away any dimension of agency against the terms of its contract, it destroys its legitimacy. This means, unless it has reserved rights to territorial secession (as, for example, in the Soviet Union and Yugoslav constitutions), then any diminishment of its territory or mandate is also against the terms of its original contract (Weller, 2008: 49). For this reason, the cohesion of the interstate system relies on the same logic as the legitimacy of the state: a “founding moment” of self-determination creates a contract, which also binds the state’s actions beyond its own borders, allowing it to legitimately negotiate at an international level.

Aside from the obvious challenges with application, there are a number of tensions immanent to this universalistic logic. The first is the so-called “boundary problem” of democratic theory, first termed as such by

Frederick Whelan (1983). Roughly speaking, this refers to the challenge of demarcating the “appropriate constitution of the people or unit”, if all political subjects within a democratic community are to be thought of as equal (Whelan, 1983: 13). This is especially true within the logic of civic representationalism, wherein the people establishes itself and its terms of governance in the moment of self-determination, recognizing each other as equal political subjects within a common collective “self”. But this also means that boundaries of territory and membership must be formally delineated, an act that excludes others and possibly claims ownership of territory that was previously controlled by another political entity. As Sarah Song points out, this means that the boundary is decided by the “contingent forces of history” and violence, rather than by some universal logic of self-determination (Song, 2012: 40). Nationalism offers a “pre-political” way to avoid these questions, by claiming that the people is already bounded, with some existing historical right to territory existing at the moment of contract with the state (ibid.). As mentioned before, each nationalist claim might be understood as wholly particular and not governed by an overarching logic of legitimation—each member of a nation is equal to each other member of the nation, and the nation’s boundaries are fixed—so the act of exclusion of others to membership and territory is legitimate by the terms of the particular claim. But the problem reoccurs when nationalist claims (particularly to territory) overlap or exist in opposition to the current order, and because of their particularity, no universal test or reading of history exists to adjudicate which claims are legitimate.

There is also an issue of temporality here: the contract created at the moment of self-determination is meant to exist indefinitely, and thus to preserve the state’s legitimacy throughout time. And although state constitutions generally include provisions for change and amendment, a subset of the citizens bound to the contract cannot simply withdraw consent based on their evolving priorities. As new generations are born and are socialized as political subjects, they are automatically bound to the terms of the contract and have no discrete moment to affirm their consent, and thus, the “self” is fixed throughout time, even when none of the political subjects who concluded the contract are still bound by it. They can only be, in effect, contracts with a “determining” self at one point in history, and that “self” must somehow regenerate its political subjectivity with each new member of the community in order for the state to legitimately persist.

The state’s power to exercise coercion allows it to repel challenges to its authority as a means of sustaining the imagined consensual contract, but it also fixes it in a normatively powerful role as the highest form of

legitimacy. Self-determination is, when imagined in the past, the underwriter of this legitimacy. However, when imagined in the present or future, it is an existential challenge to the existing order. So self-determination, when understood in the perfectly universalistic terms I laid out earlier, must be a prior act, fixing a system of governance in perpetuity, and if that system provides some permeability to change, then acts of self-government might be absorbed into the course of the state's behavior. However, if a further act of self-determination occurs beyond the specific terms of the current order—even if it is practically identical to the same types of acts that predicated the creation of the extant state formation—it becomes one of illegality and subversion.

Determination or Determinism?

While most modern thinkers imagining self-determination as relative to the state system propose some evolution of the legal norm of self-determination, none are able to altogether resolve the tension this poses with the principle of sovereignty. Within all state-bound approaches to adjudicating new claims of statehood, political self-determination is limited to that of a direct territorial challenge to the state's sovereignty, though underpinned by different justifications. Nevertheless, this is important because political self-determination thus remains an explicit matter of property, which can be settled within the hierarchy of the state system as it exists. Sovereignty remains absolute. Compelled by sentiment of its citizens or by international norms, it might be permeable and sympathetic to certain demands to restructure the terms of its control—always, however, on its own terms as the ultimate sovereign authority. But when this is not the case and the state is antagonistically challenged on a dimension of ownership (territory, resources, authority, human capital, etc.), its acceptance of a secessionist claim amounts to the acquiescence to what it considers a theft—something that not only runs counter to its own logic of persistence, but might even be understood within a framework of representative democracy as outright state failure. The result is a return to the logic of coercion: either the state is successfully able to repel the claim, its behavior is determined by the reaction it fears in a credible threat of intervention, or it experiences a loss of control due to a violent challenge by the claimants themselves.

Then, the question to ask is: what kind of work is actually being done by the principle of self-determination under the dominant logic of governance? In most modern cases, self-government via representational democracy is perfectly easy to rectify with the state system, so long as it is predica-

ted on the idea of some past, pre-political moment of self-determination. It is also possible to imagine situations in which states do not effectively discharge their duties and lose their normative mandate. But accepting the hierarchical logic of the state system, do we humans really have a right to define the boundaries of our political self and claim sovereign ownership of what is currently controlled by another sovereign entity when it does not wish us to do so? Do we have a *right* to this normative determination, peacefully claimed in relation to, and adjudicated by, the hierarchical state system, or must a violent conflict, and thus historically contingent relations of force, determine our political present and future?

Rhizomatic Political Self-Determination

Having identified the tension between sovereignty and self-determination at the root of the state system, we can simply choose to acknowledge this situation as a *fait accompli*—an implacable fact of life in today's political system. Alternatively, we can use the recognition of this seemingly unresolvable tension as an opportunity to consider another ontology altogether—one that leaves behind the logical confines of the contractual state system and explores other ideas about what political self-determination can possibly mean. In this part, I will make a leap to the latter. Here, I hope to facilitate a useful encounter between two concepts of political self-determination that perhaps can never be fully synthesized, but are rarely considered together within the scope of one line of argumentation.

In Part 2, I argued that, despite its role at the very heart of the state system, political self-determination remains mired in deep tension with sovereignty, and when understood in the present or future sense, its normative role reduces to the *determinism* of the constituted structures of force inside the hierarchical and enduring order. Claims are either understood based on their position relative to the interests of extant states, or by the effectiveness of the violence they are able to exert against a state. So, now, the first order of business is to relax the assumption that this is the only way to understand political self-determination and thereby remove its tension with the notion of state sovereignty—this section will propose a constellation of ideas about how to imagine political self-determination when this is done.

“Desiccating” Self-Determination

In *Insurgencies*, Antonio Negri (1999) establishes an opposition between the type of *potere* (“power” in Maurizia Boscagli’s English translation) exerted by a closed constitutional order and that of *potenza* (“strength”), which represents limitless revolutionary potential. He understands the former as what comprises a “constituted” order of power (that which has been accumulated and contractualized) and the latter as “constituent” power, which is the revolutionary expression of *potenza* and the true essence of democracy. He gestures to French political scientist Emile Boutmy, who, in 1891, identified constituent power as “rising from nowhere and organizing the hierarchy of powers” (Boutmy, 1891: 250). If this mysterious constituent power comprises the original basis of the constitutional order, an original expression of *potenza*, then that must mean “a power from nowhere organizes law” (Negri, 1999: 2). This, he argues, represents a “crisis,” because the boundless normative power of *potenza* must, at once, be the foundation of the constituted order, but also simultaneously constrained and subjugated to *potere* if a representational system is to survive. At the heart of constitutional logic, Negri says, is a contradiction. Although this contradiction is not resolved within the system *per se*, the mechanics of its operation are clear. Sovereignty and constituted power are privileged and free, and constituent power is kept alive, artificially bounded and trapped behind glass.

In this arrangement, constituent power has become “subjectively desiccated”, wherein the “singular characteristics of its originary and inalienable nature vanish”, its revolutionary potential has been stifled, and it has been “situated within the concept of the nation” (Negri, 1999: 3). While it might merely be treated as a creation myth of the history of the nation and the state formation, it must be kept alive and on view if the constitutional order is to continue its operation, because “its elimination might nullify the very meaning of the juridical system and the democratic relation that must characterize its horizon” (ibid.: 4). Lastly, it is encased in “the rules of assembly”, a particular rationality of governance, and the logical link is established between suffrage and the “originary, missionary” constituent power, which is thus harvested of its power through representative mechanisms (ibid.).

By now, the parallels of this argument and what I explored in Section 2 might seem apparent. For, even viewed from within the logic of the state system, it is necessary to create strict definitional limits to political self-determination: it must, for example, occur as the result of state misbehavior,

it must manifest as ethno-national consciousness, it must be constituted by territorially delimited plebiscite, and so on. But, in the vast majority of cases, it must have *occurred* at an earlier point in time to be considered legitimate now. What Negri understands as “desiccation”—temporal limitation, destruction of revolutionary potential, and entrapment inside a particular narrative of state formation—is obviously at work here, too. Because “self-determination” implies an *act*, or at least a set of actions, when it is removed from this relationship to the state system, it is perhaps best understood as an *expression* of the same constituent power Negri defines.

Self-Determination as a “Rhizomatic” Idea

If the specific rules of “self-determination” are not clear even within the particular and rule-bound state order, then this problem must be infinitely multiplied when understood outside it. This is because, without constraint or limitation, “self-determination” is a fundamentally creative and open idea, and without encasement inside a particular definition of governance, the nature of the “political” is also in contention. Indeed, if we accept that political self-determination can be understood as an expression of constituent power, then its meaning derives from what Negri calls a “multidirectional plurality of times and spaces” (Negri, 1999: 13). When we remove the bumpers of the very particular state system, how can we even understand what that entails, much less distinguish it from its “desiccated” form?

One useful concept can be found by turning to Negri’s ontological compatriots Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who explored a notion of “the multiple” that is clearly related to the “multidirectional plurality” Negri identifies. They write:

The multiple *must be made*, not by always adding a higher dimension, but rather in the simplest of ways, by dint of sobriety, with the number of dimensions one already has available—always $n-1$ (the only way the one belongs to the multiple: always subtracted). Subtract the unique from the multiplicity to be constituted; write at $n-1$ dimensions. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 6)

The multiple is, as such, a total plurality. It is that which exists at all times, in all spaces, in all possibilities. It is not, they argue, a synthesis of all particularities and all realities; those particularities are simply subtracted from the multiple, and as such, the multiple is comprised partially of all things, but all things are not its totality. The radicality of constituent power, as

also imagined in this way, is in its revolutionary derivation from totality and infinite possibility. This idea is extremely useful for our purposes. Political self-determination, without the entrapment of a particular constituted order, is something that appears as an expression of total creativity. And, if we are attempting to identify the manifestations of something this limitless, an expression of a constituent power that derives from the multiple, we need to simultaneously consider its radical plurality alongside the particularity of what we are attempting to investigate. The concept of $n-1$ helps envision this operation.

Deleuze and Guattari write that “a system of this kind could be called a rhizome” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 6). The image of the rhizome distinguishes it from a system of “arborescence”, which imagines the world as a tree and its roots, in which there is “One that becomes two, then of the two that becomes four” (ibid.: 5). The arborescent mode of thought envisions a singular starting point, from which all things derive hierarchically, in constant bifurcation from one another. When the multiple is “effectively treated as a substantive”, and understood as a rhizomatic system, it can be thought of as a multiplicity (ibid.: 8). To investigate political self-determination beyond its desiccated state, it appears that we can accept some of the abstractions of the multiple, and in conferring substantiality, conceive of it as a rhizomatic multiplicity. From its position in the state system, part of a unitary whole, it has a clear foundational role of logical, representational legitimation. But when imagined beyond a particular binary, hierarchical, and “arborescent” system, the nature of its multiplicity is clear: what it *can* be and what kind of relationships it *can* create depend on how it is subtracted from the multiple by those who are self-determining. We avoid the trap of determinism by eschewing the logic of universal derivation from the One.

In proposing that we conceive of political self-determination that has been decoupled from the sovereign state system as rhizomatic, I also propose that we refer to it as such. But why not simply call this idea “alternative” political self-determination? I contend that, while “alternative” may be a useful shorthand to think about particular manifestations of self-determination beyond the state, it is also deferential to that which is *not* alternative, or in other words, that which is “standard”. We risk, then, buying the arborescent logic of binary opposition in understanding how political self-determination must manifest. In doing so, we understand it as necessarily different from the passions that drive the operations of the state system, which is the natural standard, and so we are obligated to propose something better—a “superior alternative,” so to speak. But we need not think of the symbologies and slogans of our particular history and the ghosts

of past oppositions to imagine possible expressions of constituent power. In short, imagining political self-determination as rhizomatic gives us the space to explore what is and might be, rather than what has been.

Determining the Political

Now, we confront the problem of defining the “bounds” of self-determination. For, if it is subtracted from a multiplicity—with infinite possible forms and manifestations—how can we understand how it would manifest in a way that we are able to recognize as “political”? We are thus faced with the challenge of how *not* to simply construe rhizomatic political self-determination as some kind of mirror opposite of its desiccated form. We risk falling into the trap of solely recognizing collective action that mimics the dominant logic of governance: a constituted, hierarchical structure that challenges one of the particular elements of the modern state system, and as such, becomes our coordinates for imagining rhizomatic self-determination. As Negri cautions, “any philosophy that even heroically has an institutionalist outcome must be refused if we want to grasp the strength of the constituent principle” (Negri, 1999: 23).

The challenge lies, as such, in imagining self-determination (“the constitutive act”) in a way that does not map to a vertical or hierarchical structure that regulates behavior and instead preserves the implication of total possibility that renders its essence rhizomatic. Perhaps the first layer of this question can be deferred without a great deal of trouble: the subtraction of “self-determination” from the multiple implies the particular construction of the 1. And, because we are vesting an actor (the “self”) with that operation, we are absolved of having to fix its meaning as absolute. Each “self” that “determines” creates both the particularity and the meaning of its own action.

In his reading of Baruch Spinoza, Negri (1991) explores this idea. Negri argues that Spinoza’s engagement with the plane of the material understands reality as a particular expression, but one with a relationship to a horizon of potentiality. Spinoza rejects the dominant theology of the divine, instead viewing the *divine* as “a total horizon that does not recognize even a logical transcendence” (Negri, 1991: 127). As such, the divine is “the complex of potential force” (*ibid.*). Instead of a single, representative figure, the divine *is* the multiple, and the material is simply what is subtracted from it, becoming the particular.

Thus, while we cannot precisely define the “alternative”, some singular nature of that which exists beyond what has already been determined on the material plane, we can *create* a form of it. This is, in Negri’s interpretation, enabled by the nature of Spinoza’s vision of the political. Though

it speaks in terms of what is “naturally” possible, and in some senses determined by human passions, Negri argues that it is situated far from the framework of “natural right” thinkers who see the necessity of constraining the “natural” violence of humans by a sovereign arbiter. Instead, humans can effectively determine a *new reality*, created from what was before only a potential characteristic of the multiple.

As such, Spinoza’s “constitutive problematic” remains open to the infinite logical horizon of the multiple, rather than that which is *already* a reality. In Spinoza’s political logic, Negri recognizes that “the passage from individuality to community does not come about either through a transfer of power or through a cession of rights; rather, it comes about within a constitutive process of the imagination that knows no logical interruption” (Negri, 1991: 110). This endless constitutive imagination manifests in acts that mine the particular from the multiple—this sense of the political moves to the plane of material precisely as it is determined. Collective passions are the *animus*, and those can be passions of joy and spontaneity rather than antagonism and constraint. The political cannot be predicted or understood as a theologically divine truth; it is simply what is real because it is made so.

When we imagine rhizomatic self-determination as the process of subtracting a political reality from the multiple, the weight of this interpretation becomes clear. The state and state system are part of a particular reality with its own logic of legitimation, which has been subtracted out of this plurality. But the rhizomatic idea requires no legitimation of supposedly universal principles of natural, binary antagonism. “Natural” law, as Negri interprets Spinoza, is what can be determined as natural, and it can be determined as such because we can imagine it. In this reading, rhizomatic self-determination happens not just when a particular state or governance order is created—it is nothing less than our act of *creating* a nature of the political.

Determining the Self

We now must address the question of subjective agency: who is the collective *self* in this rhizomatic notion of *self-determination*? To avoid relying on any sort of “pre-political” logic of human community or fixed boundedness to establish this collectivity, the political *self* might then be imagined (as it is within Negri’s reading of Spinoza) as a spontaneous construction of human desire and will—founded in mutual aid and collaboration, rather than as some natural act of exclusion. With this framing, it is possible to imagine a political *self* constituted not by way of ceding individual agency to a

“transcendental mediator,” but as a unity of will and a recognition of the *collective* multitude as a function of human desires (Negri, 1991: 135). After all, “the concept of collectivity is nothing other than an ontological determination of the relationship between multiplicity and unity”, which melts down the definitional boundaries of individuality and collectivity to functions of the same constitutive process of human creativity (ibid.: 135–136). The boundaries of the *self* are thus irrelevant (or at least entirely permeable), and as a result, the logics of communitarian exclusion also disappear.

But, if it has no fixed delimitation, how does the *self* become a subject? Jacques Rancière (2001) imagines the emergence of the political as the rupture of the dominant logic of ordering, which creates a “subject defined by its participation in contrarities” (Rancière, 2001: 2). Effectively, it is in the exercise of collective agency that the *self* is constituted. When Rancière (2006) makes the equation between an exercise of this type of agency with the notion of “democracy”, it manifests in the disruption of that which is considered the “natural” political logic of governance and assembly. Rancière imagines this moment of creation at the point of departure from the logic of *arkhè*—the philosophy of governance by “natural right”, and the disruption of dominance of those considered “appropriate for the role” (Rancière, 2006: 39). There has been no pre-defined reason or legitimation for this disruption; it simply occurs as a function of collective will. He sets up this opposition in terms of the emergence of *la politique*, which counters the dominant logic of *la police*. In the terms we discussed before, this could be said to occur at the moment when a new reality is subtracted from the multiple—a moment of self-determination. Thus, Rancière imagines that this moment, in addition to constituting the new “politics”, also creates the subject-*self*.

In this way, the radically creative essence of rhizomatic political self-determination is present on both sides of the hyphen. We need not search for a bounded community that has defined its limits to confer subjectivity. We also do not need to search for a single, individual “self” or many “selves” transferring agency to a constructed collective. The problem is solved by the unlimited potentiality of the idea—the simple but radical notion that, in the creative act of determining its political reality, the collective also determines itself.

The Temporal Challenge

If we now wish to move this argument from the domain of metaphysics to that of the material, how are we to identify material *instances* of rhizomatic political self-determination when we have established its definition as

endlessly multiple? Negri solves this problem in his investigation of constituent power by analyzing historical episodes and situating their creativity in the context of the history of the juridical state system. The contours of constitutive power and resulting acts of self-determination thus become visible when viewed next to the dominant logics of their time. Situated within a perspective of contemporaneous historical reality, these acts of self-determination can be understood as radical ruptures in governance logic and be recognized as constitutive of previously unrealized political possibilities. As Negri himself puts it, when constituent power is recognized in history, it is “the supreme principle of a becoming that has its roots in the past, in the necessary preconditions of what exists; in the past it is seen producing the present” (Negri, 1999: 232).

We might, however, perform a similar operation with regard to cases of the present. (Though, of course, we must allow for some lag, and call these “recent” acts of political self-determination, rather than “present” ones.) In this regard, we even have the advantage of open potentiality—some acts of collective self-determination in the recent past have unleashed vectors of possibility that have not yet concluded in encasement within state logic or in its disruption. It is at this critical moment that we might be able to consider the implications of collective actions that *have happened*, but whose direct effects *have not ended*.

What about the future? This is one temporal direction that I argue we should not follow. A single predictive discussion of how *future* self-determination is likely to (or should) occur would be a solely individual exercise, and one that would be stumble upon the tangles of multiplicity. To avoid the traps of determinism we discussed before, prediction should be avoided: in order to *expect* some outcome, we must be able to extend the logic of its progression. But this is the very logic that we imagine being ruptured by an act of self-determination—encasing the future in the particularity of the present.

The Epistemological Challenge

Now, before moving on to consider “recent” acts of rhizomatic self-determination, we must confront the second challenge—one of epistemology. Namely, how are we to imagine acts that create new logics and knowledges when relying on an academic understanding born of a particular European tradition? For, despite its rejection of transcendental and universal reality, the ontology we have just explored was largely authored by European thinkers and was shaped by the particular experiences of Western history

and society. Much of it is presented in binary opposition to the particularly European construction of the state system. Our relying solely on the epistemic extensions of this ontology in material cases poses the risk of constraining us, once again, to a simple mirror-image critique of a particular political logic.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) writes in *Epistemologies of the South* that a meaningful critical theory can only be constructed by looking for voices beyond Western epistemic structures. This argument challenges us to seek instances of self-determination and “emancipatory transformations” that may not appear, at first, to even materially resemble the historical experiences of European society. If we are to avoid becoming entrapped by a perspective that, at once, eschews universalism, but still seeks particular patterns of behavior that are largely colored by a particular historical experience, we must attempt to better understand what might exist outside the Western epistemological structure. In essence, this amounts to seeking encounters with that which might challenge the state system in some sense, but may not direct its collective will toward lodging particular claims situated inside its logic.

We cannot pretend to wholly overcome this challenge while working inside a Western system of language and academic exchange. Yet, it is crucial to keep this limitation in mind and, to the extent possible, to understand the material investigation of rhizomatic self-determination as one of “encounter” rather than one of definitive “explanation”. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014) illuminates some of this challenge relative to the anthropological discipline in his *Cannibal Metaphysics*. Here, he acknowledges the problem that Sousa Santos calls the “protagonism of intellectuals” as an immanent issue of the discipline: the systemic recognition of the debates and contexts of the investigators as universal while the so-called “subject” is sapped of intellectual productivity (Sousa Santos, 2014: 26).

He imagines this project to recognize productive agency in the societies under study as “the decolonization of thought,” in that it acknowledges the productive co-creation in the moment of encounter, rather than the assignment of Western coordinates of meaning (ibid.). This seems like a simple proposition, but has the effect of radically reconfiguring particular epistemological boundaries of what is universally “natural” and what is relatively “cultural”, or at least rendering their meanings contingent. For the purposes of investigating material recent acts of rhizomatic self-determination, we face a similar dilemma. If we are looking for moments of creation that constitute new collectives and political realities, we must not simply consider formations that challenge a variety of political constitution that we

understand from the perspective of one “cosmo-vision” of epistemological particularity. We must also attempt to understand acts of self-determination that create logics situated far beyond the binary oppositions of the Western state system.

Approaching the Material

Our discussion of temporality and epistemology leaves us with some useful guidance. Chiefly, we clearly should not seek to identify an objective case of “perfectly” rhizomatic political self-determination. By fixing the criteria of this category, we would encase what we seek to understand within the suffocating limitations of our own logic. We would valorize something that is simply a subtraction from the multiple as a universal truth, entrapping its creative nature in our explanatory one. In this vein, we should also avoid predicting the future, for fear of ignoring the constitutive and contingent power of new epistemologies and political realities that will arise from collective will, rather than from the extant logics we can extend.

Yet it is also clear that we should not *abandon* the constraints of our particular logic—doing so would render the project of working from a Western academic perspective completely meaningless. Instead, we should seek an explanation of the projects of self-determination we investigate from the voices of those who are participating, and instead of *translating* these ideas to a context of binary opposition with the dominant governance logic of the state system, perhaps *situate* them in a context we understand. This means seeking to understand how they relate to the state system without simply assuming that their political logic is in direct synthesis or opposition with the state system. In fact, each of the four cases I will consider in Part 4 entail wildly divergent claims relative to the state system—our task is merely to recognize their particularity. Perhaps, in this way, we should draw inspiration from Spinoza himself in the goals of our investigation: seek out what is “*Non opposita sed diversa*” (“not opposed but different”).

Case Studies of Rhizomatic Self-Determination

Now, we arrive at the point of considering collective political acts as moments of rhizomatic self-determination. In this section, I will present four recent cases of collective political action, endeavor to understand the challenges they pose to the state formation, and present a discussion about how the vectors of possibility each creates can be understood as modeling the

ideas we explored in Part 3. The aim of this section is to introduce a more material understanding of how certain claims of self-determination unleash new scripts of political possibility and subjectivity, and as such, can be understood as “rhizomatic”.

Catalonia: Sovereign Self-Determination and Transversality

Perhaps the most obvious recent act of sovereign self-determination was the October 2017 Catalan Independence referendum. In many regards, this situation in Catalonia perfectly models the dimensions of the problem that we addressed in Part 2: a secessionist claim positing one representational political order’s wishes against the opposing interests of one that exercises the sovereign powers of statehood. The state violently challenged the referendum’s legitimacy, calling it a “constitutional and democratic atrocity” (Jones, 2017). As the actual voting began to unfold, Spain’s security forces appeared “in full riot gear, smashing their way into polling stations, dragging women out by the hair, and firing rubber bullets indiscriminately into crowds as they turned out to vote” (McLaughlin, Rebaza and Gyldenkerne, 2017). A more perfect image of a state formation exercising sovereign power against an emergent claim of sovereign self-determination could hardly be imagined. It was clear that the state regarded the entire process as invalid and illegal: not an act of self-determination, but a crime that it could legitimately halt. The representative organ claiming to “capture” the determining political energy of a Catalan secession clearly had little material ability to actually establish sovereign control of the territory and secure recognition from other states, but it aggressively advanced the argument that the referendum’s outcome destroyed Spanish legitimate control of the region. As we discussed in Part 2, in a temporally prior sense, a democratic referendum that established political will for independence in the territory might be regarded as the founding covenant of a Catalan state—but as a temporally present and future moment of determination, the contest moved back to the realm of state power and military control, which gave the advantage to the Kingdom of Spain and the determinism of the constituted state system.

In another sense, it was the latest outcome in a game of political elites—the platform of the center-right and leftist platforms that emerged following the financial crisis (most notably the Podemos movement) reached unlikely alignment in their quest to eliminate the sovereignty of the Spanish state in Catalonia and carried an alliance of popular support with the center-right coalitions that embraced the vote in the Catalan Parliament. Catalan sociologist Marina Subirats i Martori argues that this convergence was

largely induced by the aftermath of the financial collapse, and that the case represents “an economic crisis that becomes a crisis of politics and values in which people look for an exit from the current system” (Minder, 2017: 7). This opened a new opportunity for cooperation, but only in a very specific sense, because the “mainstream” Catalan representational order seeks only to “get out of the Spanish system, as opposed to the Podemos answer, which is to say we should overturn the system” (ibid.). But Franceso Salvini characterized this as a “crisis of respective power positions”, that resulted in a common goal for the 2017 referendum, and a temporary convergence of two political subjectivities: one critical of the state formation and one advocating “closed possibilities of expressions in self-determination” (Salvini, 2018).

Carlos Prieto del Campo envisions the political projects of Catalan separatism as a phenomenon of contest embedded within a temporally limited convergence: an “expansive” moment of constitutive possibility opened up by popular anti-state sentiment, offering enormous possibility to create new political subjectivities from below, but existing momentarily within the same terms as an effort to reinforce the state form under a new set of actors (Prieto del Campo, 2017: 10). He characterizes this “*mini-crisis*” as nothing less than a test of self-determination that could have wider ramifications than simply the political status of Catalonia (ibid.). Indeed, it does generate questions about how new political realities may be constituted in temporal moments of intersection, opening possibilities for new accumulations of political agency and the creation of common subjectivity. Because the collectivity occurs not simply in the domain of a formal political program, but as a common imagined future, a new political reality emerges—not in the form of an ideological synthesis, but as a moment of transversal political subjectivity that may unleash a vector that neither actor originally envisioned. This is a *transversal* meeting in the sense that Deleuze conceives a transversal as something that may

[cause us to leap] from one world to another, without ever reducing the many to the One, without every gathering up the multiple into a whole, but affirming the original unity of precisely that multiplicity, affirming without uniting *all* these irreducible fragments (Deleuze, 1972: 126).

In a sense, this mirrors the recognition of the common position of a particularly rhizomatic form of self-determination in the political crisis of Catalonia, even though the movements who share this transversal stem from fundamentally different genealogies of political structure and affiliation.

This is more than a momentary alignment of political interests: these are disparate, irreducibly different political logics that reach the same emancipatory conclusion situated outside the logic of state control—largely *because* of the problematic tensions and totalities of classic self-determination. For a moment, they meet as an intended expression of boundless, constitutive power, which they can readily use together. In an effort to legitimate its claim, the “mainstream” Catalan separatist movement must privilege the political right to self-create beyond the right of the state to maintain the *status quo*—it must, in a sense, acknowledge the existence of a political force beyond that which is already closed by the existing state system, even if upon becoming a state, the same actors would gladly desiccate this force within a constitutionally sovereign system. On the other hand, leftist political movements that wish to, as Prieto del Campo puts it, “subtract” the functions of public policy from the hierarchical logic of the state system and elite control, rely on the same constitutive basis to shape a new anti-systemic and bottom-up reality of political interaction (Prieto del Campo, 2017: 51–52). This is especially the case as the Spanish government takes more direct control of the region following the referendum, thus pushing any calls for the destruction of Spanish sovereignty in Catalonia further away from constituted reality (Duarte, 2017). The transversal interaction occurs at a deeply normative level—the imagination of a political reality possible beyond what is already determined. But it is at the point that this imagination might be constrained within an institutional outcome that the transversal intersection would be terminated—so long as the question of Catalan secession is unresolved and these political subjectivities maintained, this transversality can continue to generate new possibilities.

Zapatistas and the Chiapas Rebellion: Deterritorializing the Struggle

To many, the story of the Zapatista Uprising begins on January 1, 1994. On that day, approximately 3,000 masked gunmen entered towns in the Mexican state of Chiapas to seize power and declare war on the state (Villegas, 2017). These rebels, identifying themselves as the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN), colloquially known as the “Zapatistas”, were comprised of mostly indigenous guerrillas who entered the towns demanding an end to domination by the state, occupied public spaces, freed prisoners, and set fire to several government buildings. For the Zapatistas themselves, the story began long before their armed uprising in January 1994. The pattern

of disenfranchisement that underpinned the uprising began five hundred years earlier, with the arrival of Cortés and the waves of European colonization and conquest. The Europeans brought weapons that could exert great force, carried lethal disease, and built a system to extract resources and enrich themselves and their societies at the expense of the social structures, bodies, and resources of those living in the region (Vodovnik, 2004: 27–29). In this regard, the Chiapas rebellion was a reaction to the persistence of this great machine and its encasement in the neoliberal order. But, more than simply an insurgency, Gustavo Esteva writes that the Zapatistas

gave legitimacy to a struggle for democracy that neither surrenders itself to its illusions nor aspires to a transitory or permanent despotic substitute; a struggle that does not aim to conquer the ‘democratic power’ but to widen, strengthen and deepen the space where people can exert their own power (Esteva, 1997).

This dimension of the Zapatista project is what might be considered the most radically anti-institutional and rhizomatic.

The writings of the group’s enigmatic leader, Subcomandante Marcos comprise the lion’s share of the group’s post-1994 interaction with the “modern” world, and are often presented as poetic or allegorical communiqués that do not offer a binary rejection of the statist political project and establish arguments for a particular institutional political program. Instead, they address his transformative encounter with indigenous ideas of political order and subjectivity. As Nick Higgins argues,

his texts seek to reveal everything that has been excluded from the realm of official discourse in a way every bit as vital to the Zapatista revolution as the unexpected physical apparition of thousands of armed Indians that first made public the thin veneer of an inclusionary and developmentalist rhetoric upon which governmental claims to legitimacy had previously been based. (Higgins, 2005: 88)

The program of the Zapatistas, as such, was not simply based on the rationalities of the oppressing societies, but aimed to advance a “cultural humanism” beyond the definitional scope of the Western institutional machine (Higgins, 2005: 87).

When the Zapatistas’ project is understood apart from this rhizomatic subjective encounter, they are open to similar institutional critiques as

other leftist movements. For example, in their particular rejection of the influence of global capital flows and the state formation, Mentitis argues that they have the tendency to become entrapped in the same “reactive syllogism” of many Latin American movements, forcing them to “resist global capitalism’s proclamation of the nation-state’s death” (Mentinis, 2006: 131). But the moment of rhizomatic self-determination—the new political possibilities produced during the encounter between Marcos and the indigenous teachers of the jungle—is a crucial way to understand the project. After the brief occupation of Chiapas population centers ended and the Zapatistas retreated to the forest, their political vision could continue to take shape without material referents to what must be opposed or explained by military logic: instead, the process of “cultural contamination” described by Marcos could be expanded and spread. While the movement has never disarmed and the state is still in a declared conflict with the group, their structures of political organization and thought have now coexisted with the Mexican state for almost 25 years. If this situation does not need to be encased in the binary contests of institutional or military power, it can continue to enter broader political consciousness through the opening it created in 1994, but survive as a manifestation of the revolutionary energy and constitutive power that might have to be enclosed or destroyed by the territorial “success” or “failure” of a simple military insurgency to secure territorial control. Their most powerful weapons are now the means of communication—the global press, visual images, and revolutionary symbology—and their struggle lives on a largely deterritorialized plane. As non-indigenous members of capitalist societies also encounter and consider the possibility of a non-exploitative political future, the Zapatistas add political subjects to their collective vector of political self-determination in a very different way—not simply with radios, facemasks, and guns—but within an ever-expanding collective imagination.

Rojava: The Paradoxes and Perils of Institutionalized Autonomy

The political experiment underway in the northeastern region of Syria is part of a bold, precipitous, and radically particular story. In 2012, the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD), aligned with the famous Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), gained control of three majority-Kurdish territories close to the Turkish border, establishing the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, or Rojava (Leezenberg, 2016: 681). Though these parcels of land were geographically dispersed and ethnically heterogeneous, the PYD continued efforts to capture territory from the IS, and within it, establish a series of

revolutionary political structures. The implementation and defense of these institutions creates an opening to test a variety of ideas about democratic autonomy, women's liberation, and the dismantling of capitalist hierarchy in a material context, but it also unleashes a fierce debate about the directional production and reproduction of institutionalized revolution and the murky material realities of retaining territorial control in the midst of war.

Despite, or perhaps partially because of, the surrounding turmoil, the political structures enacted in Rojava have been of a decidedly different nature than nearly all other institutional regimes that administer physical territory, *de facto* or otherwise, in the world. These projects are explicitly inspired by the writings of Abudullah Öcalan, the PKK leader who has long been serving a Turkish government prison sentence on the island of İmralı in the Marmara Sea. While imprisoned, Öcalan "assessed the PKK's history and impact and began to criticize his party's record, becoming skeptical of its Stalinist outlook," and sought new influences for the PKK's platform (Hosseini, 2016: 255). For Kurdish nationalists, who long counted the PKK among their most visible and active allies, Öcalan broke rank, declaring the dream of the Kurdish nation-state dead. Per his new conception, nationalism became as a false hope against an encroaching world of global capital. His new theory was influenced by American anarchist thinker Murray Bookchin, who argues that is possible to conceive of problems of war and politics as intertwined with those of ecology, and in effect recognize the "emergence of the social out of the biological, of second nature out of first nature", making human political reality "open-endedly innovative", and able to "[transcend] its relatively narrow capacity to adapt only to a pre-given set of environmental conditions" (Bookchin, 2006: 28–29). Using Bookchin's embrace of a "living politics", Öcalan envisioned a form of political assembly wherein "all groups of the society and all cultural identities can express themselves in local meetings, general conventions and councils" (Öcalan, 2011: 26).

But institutionalizing this constellation of disparate influences and ideas, particularly in a climate of ever-looming war, is obviously a complex and controversial project. The institutions model the extremely local, gender-equal, and autonomous practices of the principles of Öcalan's "democratic confederalism" but, as a political formation that controls and administers territory and faces down ideological enemies, Rojava still confronts many of the problems of democratic institutionalism writ large. The PYD's assertion of control was unequivocally a military outcome, and its internal maintenance of control relies, to some extent, on the accumulation of coercive capability against those it embraces as members of its project. Indeed, in this way, Rojava must in some way reproduce the totalitarian logic of classic, boun-

ded political community if it is to succeed in its articulated goal to self-defend and survive as a political entity. In a material sense, it has been accused by global human rights watchdog organizations of “arbitrary arrests, abuse in detention, due process violations, unsolved disappearances and killings, and the use of children in PYD security forces” (Human Rights Watch, 2014). This is in addition to accusations of “forced displacement and home demolitions” in areas that had been previously held by the IS, which the PYD justifies in terms of “military necessity” (Amnesty International, 2015).

The ability of Rojava to extend collective subjectivity without systemic coercion is likely to be a core facet of its revolutionary survival—as Cemgil and Hoffman point out, “a central contradiction in the project is that the main target of this attempted social transformation, hierarchy, is also deeply wedded to the condition of its emergence through a necessary militarization under conditions of armed struggle” (Cemgil and Hoffmann, 2016: 70). Plus, as Michiel Leezenberg points out, Rojava has evolved a number of “state-like” mechanisms of leadership and potential violence. He argues that, “the PYD constitutes a Leninist vanguard based on a strictly organized party structure and backed by a strong military wing and security apparatus”, which has “reproduced the PKK’s Stalinist personality cult around Öcalan” (Leezenberg, 2016: 685). This may also represent a lack of intellectual plurality that manifests, among other ways, in a deeply binary and particular conception of “women’s liberation” that effaces the struggles of queer and other vulnerable minorities in Rojava (Ghazzawi, 2017).

One potential means of imagining this case as an exercise of rhizomatic self-determination (rather than simply a classically flawed reproduction of binary statist logic) is to distinguish the Rojavan project as an imagined political reality from its engagement with other logics of control, even though its creators and leaders may, to some extent, implicitly embrace these logics themselves. Anahita Hosseini (2016) applies Alain Badiou’s theory of “the Event” to Rojava, in that it emerged unpredictably and directly induced into existence a new “Truth” by its occurrence. Though, perhaps in the intervening years since Hosseini’s article, Rojava has developed new entanglements with its surrounding “anti-Events”, her characterization of its founding bears strong echoes to the notion of rhizomatic self-determination. Indeed, as she points out, its unlikely situational emergence and bold political imagination mean that “the conscious subjects of Rojava have moved well beyond a mere reaction against IS and are showing signs of a true ‘desire’ for life,” and that in doing so, they “have confronted head-on the Machiavellian *Fortuna*, which has emerged from the ruins of war and chaos, [seizing] it to create a new social order [and] hope amongst those

who were losing it" (Hosseini, 2016: 263). Perhaps, in this sense, Abdullah Öcalan, the Kurds of Syria, or Rojava's administrative leaders are not the protagonists of this determining moment. Instead, rhizomatic selfhood may be understood as emerging within the collective subjectivity constituted by Rojava's founding, which in turn, can stay alive within the hope for its emancipatory political future rather than within the flawed functions of an institutional machine it inspired.

Plurinationality in Bolivia and Ecuador: A Transformative Encounter

For the past decade, the South American states of Bolivia and Ecuador have functioned under new constitutional arrangements that came about as a result of collaboration with indigenous activists and social movements. They were redesigned to embody the notion of *plurinationality*, which entails the recognition of a fundamental diversity of cultures and perspectives inside the state and the defense of this diversity in all public institutions (Acosta, 2009: 17). The philosophical program underpinning this principle went much further than a recognition of formal subjective equality among "citizens"—in this fundamental "refoundation" of the state, the constitutions recognized the existence of alternative conceptions of economic and political relations that were, in turn, underpinned by a fundamentally different conceptions of existence and the relational links between individual, society, and nature (Sousa Santos, 2010: 14). This extends far beyond the notion of multiculturalism in its Western sense, and instead embraces "multiple forms of democracy and new forms of citizenship" that provide "indigenous social movement groups the ability to be 'equal' on their own terms, along with tools they can use to enforce these rights" (Lupien, 2011: 790).

Yet, these movements largely also view the state system itself and its hierarchical incorporation in a globally extractive capitalist structure to be the result of the same forces of colonial domination and cultural "epistemicide" that created the conditions of social domination inside Bolivia and Ecuador (Sousa Santos, 2014: 149). This raises the question: how can opposition to the state form and global capitalist system exist within the same political program that advocates *collaboration* with the state to enshrine additional rights in the very contractual order that legitimates the state's existence, as well as its agency in the international system? The approach must, in this sense, be necessarily rhizomatic and avoid the logical trap of totality—after all, a binary and omnitemporal rejection of the state would invalidate the

entire project of constitutionalizing plurinationality within it. But, in a time of “strong questions and weak answers” *vis-à-vis* a powerful paradigm of modernity, the recognition of universalism as “another form of particularity” creates an opening for possibilities that might otherwise seem contradictory (Acosta, 2009: 24). Indeed, indigenous activists and academics hope that this might even include a genuine transformation of the state formation in its encounter with other political imaginations.

According to Pascal Lupien, though the Bolivian constitution “goes further in meeting specifically indigenous demands”, in both cases, the resulting constitutions shared a number of formal and institutional similarities that derive directly from the interaction of the state with indigenous activist platforms (Lupien, 2011: 792). In addition to the formal recognition of plurinationality, both new constitutions provide for more direct processes of local decision-making and rights to natural resources, which have previously been rejected by the state government (*ibid.*: 793). They also allow for “intercultural” structures of education that allow for instruction in indigenous languages and the incorporation of non-Western epistemology in the curriculum (Sousa Santos, 2010: 167). Crucially, both embrace the notion of *buen vivir* (the “good life”), which conceives of the right to communal and natural wellbeing as equally important as that of the possessive individual (Bravo Chávez, 2009: 142). This notion also “assumes and respects differences and complementarities among human beings and between humans and non-humans from an ecological perspective, emphasizing the principles of reciprocity, complementarity and relationality in human interactions and in relation to the cycles of nature” (Merino, 2016: 273).

The key to understanding why this collective political project can even occur is the non-binary possibility of plurinationality and *buen vivir*—these notions hold that the state is not a universally positive or a negative entity, but that its logic can be transformed. It need not be always hierarchical or extractive, or always embrace neoliberal notions of human development. Instead, by changing its very fabric, the codes that spell domination for indigenous communities can be altered, and new possibilities for a political future can be unlocked. If the state and its logic are conceived as universal and transcendental, the very idea of plurinationality seems absurd, or at least painfully naïve. But if the state is conceived as a particular system with particular rules, it becomes possible to see that those rules might be changed. Certainly, this is aided by embracing the multiplicity implied by *buen vivir*, which recognizes that what is valuable is more than just our individual rationality: it is all the myriad ways of knowing that we receive or can devise. Instead of a misguided episode of political co-option, that means that

we might recognize the “constellation” of different “lexicons, narratives, and imaginations” that exist within indigenous culture, and recognize the creative power they can wield (Sousa Santos, 2009: 47). Thus, beyond the incorporation of a “class”, “nation”, or “minority” interest in a constitutional order, the effort to “refund” the state is the construction of autonomy and subjectivity in collective will (Bárceñas, 2011: 74). Surely, state logic has not yet been entirely transformed by this encounter with indigenous political imaginations, but this does not mean these efforts have failed. Instead, the new constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador might be understood not as the termination of these possibilities, but as their beginning.

Conclusion

Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come.

- From “A Thousand Plateaus” by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 1987

Beyond the boundaries of the “known”, political creativity takes on the darkly exciting character of endless possibility. Acts of “rhizomatic” self-determination, as I have discussed them, are those that manifest constituent power as subtractions from the *multiple*, thereby creating a subjective “self” and a new political logic. They are, as we saw in the previous section, not always easily characterized within the Western vernacular, chiefly because they might be situated outside of it. Today, inside of a geographically expansive state and economic system, buttressed by powerful epistemologies and algorithms, they might even seem irrelevant or laughably utopic. Yet, they are crucial to the study of politics, because acts of self-determination are how we got here.

In Part 2, I discussed how the narrative of the state system relies on a form of this notion to persist. Today, the international legal system invokes a “right to self-determination” in the same breath as a state’s right to sovereignty, but the former is vaguely defined even within this regime. This mainstream approximation of “self-determination” evolved alongside notions of the modern state, growing to encompass both notions of civic pluralism, as well as those of nationalism, and it was applied most forcefully in the process of post-colonial state building. Now, the debate has shifted to essentially equate “self-determination” with “secession” from existing states, because nearly all habitable territory on Earth is administered under

a particular state's sovereignty and no consensus exists as to what criteria would constitute a universally homogenous political "self" that might legitimately "determine". A state's right to deploy violence to defend its continued existence is justified on the basis of a prior moment in which a political community has defined itself and its contract with the state. This logic implies that the fundamental bounds of these arrangements are set in perpetuity—new claims of self-determination are met with force legitimized by old ones, turning *determination* into *determinism* inside the ontological bounds of the state system.

When, in Part 3, I argued that if we could relax these assumptions of the state's totality, we could then imagine the state formation itself as a particularity. This allowed us to explore arguments about what "self-determination" means relative to the notion of *multiplicity*, and how new political scripts could be generated by acts of collective will, rather than simply relative to arrangements of formal statehood. I argued that we should imagine these acts as "rhizomatic", rather than "alternative", to avoid the trap of imagining the mirror-image of what already exists in service of establishing a critique of it. In searching for material examples of these acts, I also argued that we should search for ongoing vectors of political possibility, some of which may be difficult to align with a Western frame of analysis, instead of attempting to predict what may emerge.

In Part 4, I attempted to identify a few such instances. We visited four cases of recent rhizomatic self-determination: the transversal intersection of movements seeking to eliminate Spanish sovereignty in Catalonia, the deterritorialized project of the Zapatistas, the paradoxes faced by the political formation in Rojava, and the project to transform two South American states to embrace the notion of *plurinationality*. For each, we considered how the collective actors generated new political codes, the challenges they mounted to the constituted state system, and how their political potential lies beyond the binary logic of secessionist self-determination. Many of these acts first appear contradictory. But, if we embrace the notion of *multiplicity*, these contradictions become paradoxes, and acting on them opens new vectors of possibility.

Self-determination, when imagined beyond the state system, is how new political realities can be subtracted from the *multiple*. What I have considered as examples of "rhizomatic" self-determination are, in effect, bold moments of political imagination, but the state, too, is imagined. It is an organizing logic, and a powerful one at that. It marshals vast material forces, but it is not itself material—teachers, parliaments, coins, tanks, schools, television towers, politicians, soldiers, and flags follow its lead, but it exists

only in us. It is because we imagine it to be—and we can imagine many things.

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