



BRIAN PRICE

A THEORY OF REGRET

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Brian Price

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FOR ALEXANDER GARCÍA DÜTTMANN

We do not see our hand in what happens, so we call certain events melancholy accidents when they are the inevitabilities of our projects (I, 75), and we call other events necessities because we will not change our minds.

Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*

I now regret very much that I did not yet have the courage (or immodesty?) at that time to permit myself a *language of my very own* for such personal views and acts of daring, labouring instead to express strange and new evaluations in Schopenhauerian and Kantian formulations, things which fundamentally ran counter to both the spirit and taste of Kant and Schopenhauer. What, after all, did Schopenhauer think about tragedy?

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

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Introduction

REGRETTABLE POLITICS

This book is born of an effort to take regret seriously as a political emotion. It is also an attempt to understand the oft-professed absence of regret—the decisive moment in which one declares that one regrets nothing—not as a sign of virtue, as it is typically heard in boast, but as an expression of conviction. By “conviction,” I mean a commitment to first principles, or the betrayal of human complexity and the diversity of life in the ongoing adherence to what we have only ever believed in one way. If I profess my conviction, if I give it a name, I usually do so when the corresponding signs of my belief—what I believe and what I want you to believe even more than I do, so that I am never left to doubt myself—have gone missing in the world. If what I believe is best has always been before me in the right way, why would I protest? The tautological character of conviction is such that its seeming and ceaseless relevance depends on the constant absence or presence of whatever this or that holder of conviction seems to prize most. In order to maintain my sense of conviction, I must remain unsatisfied and also always without remorse, so that my perpetual dissatisfaction can stand as proof that I have only ever been right about what I believe to be wrong. The political left and the political right are equally susceptible to conviction in just this sense, which can only name a perpetual absence that must be corrected by various means of insistence on what does not change, whether rhetorically, in the form of dogmatic speech, or else as real violence.

Is this not the lesson of Adolf Eichmann, the haunting advocate of the clear conscience, the most infamous opponent of regret? Recall Eichmann's famous declaration about regret, published in English translation in *Life* in 1960. The phrase, of course, has become a commonplace of popular culture: "But to sum it all up, I must say that *I regret nothing*. Adolf Hitler may have been wrong all down the line, but one thing is beyond dispute: the man was able to work his way up from lance corporal in the German army to *Führer* of a people of almost 80 million. I never met him personally, but his success alone proves to me that I should subordinate myself to this man."¹ Most striking in Eichmann's claim to have no regrets is the attendant admission that Hitler "might have been wrong all down the line," an admission he made, it should be emphasized, to a fellow ss officer turned Dutch journalist in Argentina in 1955.² That is, Eichmann was speaking to someone with whom he could trust to be already in agreement—not a reporter from *Life* but someone he was bound to by a shared sense of conviction. Likely, Eichmann experienced the feeling as an expression of duty. This is what allowed Eichmann, and presumably the Dutch journalist in exile, to recognize a right that did not diminish every other wrong so much as render those wrongs ethically irrelevant on the basis of what Richard Rorty has described, in critical terms, as a "preference ranking." For Rorty, preference rankings are what follow, in certain strains of moral philosophy, from an inability to accept that "the boundaries of the self are fuzzy and flexible," which leads moral philosophers—and also Eichmann, in no sense a philosopher—to draw lines around selves where there may be none and to develop systems "which divid[e] people up according to whom one would prefer to be fed first, for example."³ What mattered most to Eichmann was the becoming-*Führer* of Hitler, the invocation of eighty million as a picture of consensus, and consensus as the becoming-arbiter of the Good.

Curiously, Eichmann's response in the interview unfolds in the rhetorical structure of a preference ranking in process. It is one that depends, as any preference ranking must do—and however tacitly it happens—on a consideration of potential regrets. If Eichmann begins the ending of his confession by saying, "But to sum it all up" (the clause that always goes missing in its everyday citation), it is because he earlier admits in the interview that he did, in fact, regret something:

There was only one thing I regretted. If I had not been in a state of shock at this time, I would have done more for my wife and children. Unfortunately, I did not make provision for them ahead of time, unlike the gentlemen from the Intelligence Section of Schellenberg's, the so-called kid-glove boys in the S.S. I, too, could have had my family securely wrapped in a very comfortable cocoon of foreign exchange and gold. In fact, I could have easily sent them on to the farthest, the most neutral of foreign countries. Long before the end, any of the Jews I dealt with would have set up foreign exchange for me in any country I had named, if I had promised any special privileges for them.

As it was, I was able to give my wife only a briefcase full of grapes and a sack of flour before going up into the mountains from Altaussee. I had also given them poison capsules, one for my wife and one for each child, to be swallowed if they fell into the hands of the Russians.⁴

There is, of course, an even more chilling discussion of regret, even if the word isn't used—chilling precisely as a testament to Arendt's well-known and controversial claim of Eichmann's stupidity in place of an idea that he was, by essence, evil. Save for the fact that what Eichmann appears to do in the interview is to invoke potential mistakes and begin to classify them. Even earlier in the interview, for instance, Eichmann reports that "Himmler went on to say that he had made some mistakes. 'I'll tell you one thing, Eichmann,' he said, 'if I have to do it over again, I will set up the concentration camps the way the British do. I made a big mistake there.' I didn't know exactly what he meant by that, but he said it in such a pleasant, soft way that I understood him to mean the concentration camps should have been more elegant, more artful, more polite."⁵ Setting aside, for the moment, the odd assumption that Eichmann makes about the notion of a better—"more elegant, more artful, more polite"—concentration camp, what we see here is a steady movement from mistake (Himmler) to regret (about his wife and children) to the final determination that, in sum, he has no regrets at all (how could eighty million people be wrong?). In other words, Eichmann separates reason and emotion in the very act of establishing a preference ranking, so that what might have produced pangs of regret—his wife and kids with a bag of grapes and a pocket full of poison—is, for him, no real cause for regret at all, since the best thing that could have happened, according to his logic, happened. Eichmann's response is not so unusual in terms of the way that regret is regularly

regarded: as long as the best is realized, so long as virtue is achieved or observed, regret can be understood not as a response to a mistake but instead as a mistake in itself. It is the kind of mistake—perhaps the only of its kind—in which the consequences of that mistake disappear in the instant of its identification. For example, what Eichmann seems to assume, or simply wants his reader to believe, is that every choice comes down to an evaluation of the relative value of potential goods, which makes regret both possible and unnecessary at once, insofar as choice is never understood as something that we make without an enclosed, auto-democratic scale.

There is, of course, nothing terribly unusual about such an insistence on the separation of reason and emotion, especially as that separation is very often made in response to the manifestation of regret. The distinction is as common to Western philosophy as it is to Eichmann's special brand of stupidity. As we'll see in chapter 1, for instance, Aristotle considered regret to be useless to both the determination and the experience of virtue. Alternatively, one could argue against such a notion, as Janet Landman, author of a pioneering study of regret, has, and say instead that "regret is a form of inductive reason in that it proceeds from the given to the not given, comparing what is (a particular 'given') with what might have been."⁶ It is the feeling of regret that cannot be separated from the act of distinction and comparison. Our thought is motivated, in such an account, by a feeling about something that has transpired and that we now revisit, rationally. It could also be said that regret, if we take the claim for inductive reason seriously, is a feeling that brings us back to reason. This is not so far from the way that the problem has been taken up in moral philosophy around the idea of rational regret, which in most cases involves the establishment of what should count as a greater or lesser good, so that we can say, without fear of self-deception or absurdity, that we have good reason to regret having chosen x rather than y .⁷ Or as Thomas Hurka puts it, "The regret is rational as an instance of proportional love [in which we divvy up and rank our feelings in relation to the relative merits of each possible good, whether state or object, that will be included in decision], but like all such love it becomes less rational for more remote possibilities."⁸ So, for Hurka, it would be rational to regret experiencing bad weather when on holiday, insofar as we will have missed out on an anticipated pleasure, but not more than one would regret missing out on the pleasure "you would have enjoyed had a stranger given

you a million dollars on the beach or had aliens abducted you and taken you to an intergalactic pleasure palace.”⁹ In other words, regret can be understood as rational if we retain a sense of the inherent value of things, on the one hand, and impose modest limits on our imaginations, on the other. But it is hard for me to imagine what good such modesty might bring, beyond the assurance it may provide us about what we have chosen to do or accept or else decline. If I am forced to imagine an intergalactic pleasure palace in order to understand why I chose to visit Seattle when I could have gone to Palm Springs, then it would be hard to imagine a use for regret in the world of political experience, or even, in the realm of the social, as it involves an experience with others whom we do not, exactly, comprehend.

By contrast, at the core of this book is an argument that regret is unconditionally transformative, and thus of no real import for reason. Regret is unconditionally transformative in that when I feel a pang of regret when revisiting an image or memory of something I have done and imagine how I might have done it differently, but without any definite image of what I might do next time, knowing what I now think I know, I do not project something because I feel I am in possession of nothing. And, besides, if there is a next time, it will not be the same time that has already passed me by. Regret is not restorative, just as we imagine paintings to be subject to restoration, inasmuch as we consider paintings to be things that can be cleaned or repaired in time or in the event of an accident (the risk of time): shown as they really were, shown now as they truly are. For instance, if I turn down my friend’s invitation for drinks on Thursday night, after having done the same thing to her repeatedly before and for the same reason, she may decide to stop trying; she may cease to be my friend. A few months pass by and I realize that I have not heard from my friend. When I write and when I call, I receive no reply. I begin to feel regret. I begin to wonder about myself. I dwell on the event of our last moment of contact, which is also my most recent appeal to my supposed busyness. Now that I feel the loss of my friend, my work seems less pressing than it did before; or, at least, I can see that it was not so pressing in this one instance—not enough, as it turns out, to jeopardize a friendship I have valued, since for her, this one instance was yet one more instance of the same. In revisiting the scene of my decision, I imagine an alternative—I imagine what I believe would have been a better thing to do. I may even recall previous instances in which I responded in roughly the same way.

But I do not expect, as a consequence of what my regret now helps me to see, that I will have the same opportunity with the same person if I do now what I should have done before. I do not engage in these reflections on the condition that I will win this particular friend back, that my original image of our friendship will be restored just as it was, even if such a thing happens to happen. In all likelihood, this friend will have moved on, will have seen no reason to try again. In this case, which I take to be the more typical occasion of regret, I cannot enact a transformation in the same state. Rather, I become aware of my habit, of my inclination to deflect social obligations on the grounds of my busyness, recognizing that very few of us feel overwhelmed with available time. In attempting to mark my particular burden—*she couldn't understand how busy I really am, what it is like to do what I do*—I say of myself what distinguishes me from no other. I may not become a friend again to the one who has gone, but I recognize that in order to be a friend, I will have to address my habit of announcing my busyness. Even if my friend decides to try again, the friendship will look different than it did before. Likewise, I will take on a different image of myself for myself, even if I cannot say who it is that my next friend will be. If I can predict a friend, I will have no friend. In order to have a friend, I will have to be capable of regret.

If we imagine regret as something subject to proportion, indicated by it—to a divvying up of relative value across a range of possible actions and possible goods—I can easily see how regret, in my case, might be a reasonable thing to feel. But all that would come of such a response is the assurance that my decision was in fact a bad decision. *I really was a bad friend*, which means that I have been incapable of imagining someone else's experience from a perspective other than my own. However, if I can divide my feelings across a range of objects, states, or relations, then I will be noticeably involved in a preference ranking, which depends, ultimately, on the presence of a system or at least an ethos—on whatever it is that allows me to declare my conviction—that will ultimately negate the significance of the distinctions that I nevertheless make for the sake of comparison and decision. I tend to agree with Richard Rorty that the notion of morality exists—if it is to be in any way useful—as a way of explaining decisions that we make that seem to us unnatural, or at least potentially counterintuitive, as when I “feel an obligation to deprive both my children and myself of a portion of the available food because there are starving people outside of the door.”¹⁰ Morality, in this sense, comes

to define a duty I feel to others without having a picture of their particularity or a sense of their relation to me on the basis of something more obviously value-dependent than the fact of our shared need to eat. By contrast, “the term ‘moral obligation’ becomes increasingly less appropriate to the degree to which we identify with those whom we help: the degree to which we mention them when telling ourselves stories about who we are, the degree to which their story is our story.”¹¹ In other words, if I identify as Christian and I help someone on the basis of their being Christian as well, then there is nothing moral in what I do. If I help an atheist on the basis of our shared atheism, then there is nothing moral in what I do. In order to determine the relative value of things in this way, I would first need to define the limit of a moral economy, the categorical imperative that follows from a question that really never is one: that is, what makes a Christian a Christian? What makes an atheist an atheist? Preference rankings. Having restricted the terms of a moral economy, I can establish related bureaus (categories within the category) to imagine levels of intensity or completion based on a difference that cannot be sustained as a difference precisely because difference is what the category needs and also needs to reject. By contrast, we might say that any morality worthy of the name does not prize conviction but instead its asymmetrical cousin, which is where or, better, *how* it is that one runs the risk of regret as the beyond of reason. It is beyond reason because it is without a picture or ready-made system of evaluation.

This is precisely what Eichmann failed to recognize. In his confession to a fellow Nazi, by listing a series of regrets, he comes to the rational conclusion that he has no regrets at all, since what he chose was reasonable, in the general economy of Nazism, to choose. As Arendt has shown, Eichmann defended his actions as the lawful observation of what was then the law (i.e., his claim to being a mere bureaucrat) and despite the fact that the persistence of this lawfulness would become the proof of the unlawful in time, since Eichmann will have felt no need to deny that he did what he was accused of doing, only *how* it was being understood in Israel, in a different place and a different time. Arendt said, “Eichmann, much less intelligent and without any education to speak of, at least dimly realized that it was not an order but a law which had turned them all into criminals. The distinction between an order and the Führer’s word was that the latter’s validity was not limited in time and space, which is the outstanding character of the former.”¹² This difference—which Arendt marks as one that

exists between a response to an order and a response to the law—is also, I would argue, where we can locate a distinction between regret and its absence, between thinking and knowing. That is to say, any response to an order is subject to regret, to a feeling that occasions thinking, just where there had not been a sufficient amount of thinking before. Regret is, at the same time, adventitious to thoughtfulness, to a way of becoming responsive to things that may not be of concern to me—at least not yet, nor in memory—but that I take to matter in some way that I do not, or need not, fully understand as if it were my own experience. When thinking, I am thinking about something in particular, regardless of how clearly or distinctly said thing is to me at any point. When thoughtful, I am generally attentive: I look for nothing in particular but remain responsive to what appears. Eichmann appealed, instead, to knowledge, to established ways of being and doing, to a system of preferences that had become law, had become iterative. Eichmann hoped, as we know, that his will would come to be defined, paradoxically and in time, by a lack of agency that stems from the observance of the law. This is what made him, in Arendt's eyes, stupid. He deferred to knowledge, seemed, even, to believe in it.

We might say, then, that Eichmann felt no regret because he could not think, could only refer to the categories that were in operation when he acted. This is certainly Arendt's point. It also explains the odd response to Himmler: rather than take on the gravity of what had been done, take on the opportunity of regret for himself, Eichmann supposes that Himmler's mistake could only mean that the concentration camps could simply be made nicer, "more polite." As Arendt famously argued, one's capacity for evil is not an inherent trait, not even a capacity really, but an unwillingness (rather than an inability) to think. "The sad truth," she wrote, "is that most evil is done by people who never made up their mind to be either bad or good."¹³ This does not mean, however, that they act without conviction. Rather, conviction is what follows from an inability to think, an inability to subject to constant evaluation in different terms what we profess to believe, and to carry on instead with the divvying up, by degrees, of the always already related. This is why, for Arendt, thinking has to be understood as a particular form of political activity, in at least two, if not many more, important ways. First, she says that "the need to think can be satisfied only through thinking, and the thoughts which I had yesterday will satisfy this need today only to the extent that I can think them anew."¹⁴ In this regard, what defines conviction is the very refusal

to reimagine and redescribe the terms for doing now what we have done before. I take this point to be especially crucial to understanding why it is that we might want to carry on with a particular order of the social that we, as a political constituency, have worked so hard to enact, in place of an overestimation of failure as the key to emancipatory politics—an odd commonplace, in my view, of leftist politics. Second, thinking is political insofar as it produces a different way of acting, even if doing is what the activity of thinking cannot help but interrupt: “When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action.”¹⁵ This, it seems to me, describes the two main experiences of political life—the decision to carry on, which must be expressed as a redescription of the same, and the decision to dissent, at which point my thinking sets me apart from others. In being set apart by how I think, what I think becomes an alternative in which others can join me. As an alternative, and as a political expression, what I think gains its force on the basis not of what we have seen, but of what we do not yet know. The experience of regret is important to both options. If I stand out, and not because of the force of my thought but by way of its absence, I have the opportunity to return to what I regret having rejected. And in this sense, it makes no difference whether my rejection was a result of my passivity or of a decision I consciously made. The condition-less condition of my return is that I find a different way of thinking about what it is that I wish to continue doing, continue being part of; or else I return to and do better with it next time. In boasting that I have no regrets, I admit only that I am incapable of thinking.

For this reason, I am inclined to limit my theory of regret here largely to political considerations, with the hope that we can agree that regret is the experience we have of feeling compelled by a world and also, at times, mistaking that world, recognizing, in time—however quickly, however slowly—that worlds are made and sustained and in that way they remain unknowable in relation to first principles. One surely could, as many in fact have, write about more ordinary experiences of regret, regrets of a more personal, and sometimes trivial, kind. One such instance would be when we order a plate at dinner that we know we don’t want as much as something else and it turns out badly, or when we decide to buy something that we don’t really need and cannot afford—to state the more shallow instances of ordinary regret. Such experiences, I imagine, do have

something to teach us, but such decisions (and the regrets that follow) occur within very particular, and rarely transferable, economies of taste, in the first instance, or wealth, in the second, or sometimes both at once. They may matter, these regrets, but never to anyone other than the one who experiences them, or is implicated in the same relative and restricted economy (no matter how large it is). Alternatively, it is just as common, and thus much more important as a consideration, to experience regret in response to the death of a loved one, in which case our regrets follow from our reflection on what we did or failed to do before the end of the loved one's life. The regret that we feel in the event of the death of a loved one, which is often propaedeutic to mourning, is not as easy to disassociate from the political feeling of regret that I will be dealing with here, insofar as our feeling of regret includes the acknowledgment that the one who has passed is gone forever. So, in this sense, regret may, most simply—and also, potentially, most profoundly—be what reminds us of our finitude, and the finitude of every other, to the extent that a shift in how we perceive and act in the world changes in some way or another. Regret reawakens our thoughtfulness and potentially our moral sense, if by moral we understand our capacity to extend our care and consideration to beings about whom, and for whom, we have no picture at hand.

In linking regret to mourning, however uncontroversial such a suggestion seems to be at first blush, I am concerned to distinguish regret from melancholia, especially since I want to understand regret as a politically useful emotion. For one, regret is, in my account, not only an important political emotion: it is the affective registration of thought itself. As Freud famously argued, melancholia “is related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious.”¹⁶ This is what regret shares with mourning, even if the two states must also be told apart: if I am in mourning, or experiencing regret, I know what has passed, what it meant to me (or at least, in the case of regret, what I thought it meant to me, and how I might understand what passed now), and also that it will no longer be as it was. And while Freud prescribed no time limit for mourning—it would take whatever time it took, and could not be controlled—it was understood to be a state that we pass through, precisely because we know why, more or less, we feel the way that we do, even if we are not in possession of an ability to bring those emotions to an end. In the case of melancholia, Freud argued that the patient “knows *whom*

he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him.”¹⁷ In a state of melancholia, at least in Freud’s terms, and precisely as a pathological condition, I expect what has passed to return again and again, just as it was; and what returns as the same does so as both sign and source of the deep disregard I have for myself. Or as Eugenie Brinkema puts it, “Melancholia, in a sense, just uses the self up.”¹⁸

In *The Forms of the Affects*, Brinkema has identified, with respect to Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholia, an important problem with attempts to understand melancholia itself as “the grounding disposition of the political.”¹⁹ Noting a tendency within trauma studies and the political valorization of loss as such, Brinkema describes a tendency in political theory to conflate mourning, which can be generative—simply because the work that mourning does is to deliver us, emotionally, from an absence, and a memory that gives an image to absence, to a state of being in the world in a different way—with melancholia, which blocks transformation. As she notes, trauma theorists have ignored, in the work of conflating the two states that Freud was careful to keep separate, the unceasing and expressly unproductive negativity of melancholia: “For melancholia in Freud’s version of 1917 is anti-mediating: its stickiness to the past is precisely a recursive loop of painful attachment that cannot renounce, that never synthesizes, that is temporarily pathological for its expanded affective duration without end or change. It does not transform, and it is not transformative. Thus, a ‘politics of mourning’ that involves mediation requires a dialecticizing of that which is unmediatable in the original treatment of mourning.”²⁰ It seems to me that our tendency to say we have no regrets, upon surveying aspects of our own behavior in view of a moral self-appraisal, is importantly related to an anxiety (whether perceived or not) that follows from the recognition that we have erred, in this way or some other, which will deliver us to the depths of melancholia. We also assume that mourning, which overlaps with regret as a reflection on loss, is merely a passage to the permanent condition of melancholia, the cursed mutuality of hatred and eradication of the self. And as Freud was careful to point out, mourning is not just a response we have to the loss of a valued person or relationship, but it follows, as well, from “the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.”²¹ Hence the political dimension of mourning but not of melancholia. So, if what I fear is the passage from mourning to melancholia in admitting to myself, if not also to others, that

I have been or done wrong, I am inclined to say that I have no regrets. If I have no regrets, I can forestall the permanent ruin that I perceive to follow from an admission of regret, which is something I know anyway but refuse to countenance, finally, for myself. I may even convince myself so thoroughly that I do not experience the early pangs of mourning, which I conflate with regret and also fear as a passage to melancholia. Even the most casual reader of Dostoevsky, however, will attest to the impracticality of that strategy. Eichmann, like Dostoevsky's underground man, obviously could not stop talking, which I take to be a condition of the denial of regret itself. One has to go on making the same case to oneself and to others, which suggests that in denying regret—in declaring that we have none—we do not avoid the non-generative repetition of the same that follows from melancholia, in Freud's account. Rather, we proudly arrive there by the very means of its denial. What we repeat and experience forever, in the professed absence of regret—as summary expression—are the very terms of our refusal, which take on a phenomenal aspect that will not change so long as we keep talking.

I will come at this problem in a different way in chapter 2, by thinking about the problem of advice—whether received from a trusted mentor or a bureaucrat, trusted or untrustworthy, upon whom we nevertheless depend—as the continuation of a way of seeing and being in the world that the mentor and/or bureaucrat extends to the one who seeks counsel precisely as a way of anticipating regret. I won't come back directly to the question of melancholia, since what interests me is the productive potential of regret, but what I say there about the experience of possibilization—when we experience the world and our way in the world as the result of a deference to known ways of being and doing—describes a non-pathological mimicry, and thus experience, of the pathological dimension of melancholia. Or at least, I am concerned to indicate what possibilization shares with melancholia as a form of repetition that prevents us from seeing difference in what repeats—which is akin, but not identical, to Freud's observation that the melancholic “knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him.”

My preference, conceptually speaking, for possibilization in place of melancholia is in this very way motivated by the same political problem that Brinkema detects in the valorization of melancholia in trauma studies. Recourse to the possible—by which, in a more deconstructive tradition, which I discuss in detail in chapter 2, one indicates something

that has happened at least once and thus can be duplicated as experience—is a major, if often unacknowledged, trope of political theory. It is what happens when we bluntly project a previous political ambition, a previous version of the political as a desired ground for new and better social relations, onto situations that genuinely demand political intervention but bear little relation to the specificity of the events that gave rise to the political discourse to which we remain devoted and see as the right solution for nearly every struggle everywhere. “Historical consciousness” becomes in this way a euphemism for possibilization and conviction. It announces itself in the drawing up of parallels between one moment and another that, on the one hand, denies the problem that led to a failure in its original implementation (or characterization as record of historical events, such as when we say, too simply, that May ’68 failed because there was no systematic plan in place for a new and more emancipatory model of social relations). On the other hand, it is also what happens when we fail to notice how the specificity of our own crisis is motivated by concerns and relations very different from the ones that animated the source of our sense of political identification and transhistorical affiliation. An example of this would be when we assume that the crisis of the university today is a symptom of both why the strikes of May ’68 occurred and how the same conditions returned in enlarged form as a result of that “failure.” Put differently, possibilization is an effect that follows from the submission of our politics to preference rankings, or else from when we derive our politics from them, which means that not only do we operate with a sense of the Good, but we do so as if it were essential in our case and inessential in every other case. Put differently still, as Jacques Rancière has, “what is proper to politics is thus lost at the outset if politics is thought of as a specific way of living.”²²

Such, it seems to me, are the problems that have beset radical politics for some time. In asking, as Lenin so famously did in his eponymous pamphlet from 1902, “what is to be done?” we all too often look to what was done at least once before, in which case there will be nothing historical in what I find and also in what I do. For instance, in *The Enigma of Capital*, to cite a prominent instance, David Harvey offers a variation that may not be a variation at all: “‘What is to be Done?’ cannot be answered, to be sure, without some sense of who might do it and where.”²³ If we have a sense of who might do it and where, then what we know will have been decided strictly in terms of what has already been done at least once,

which becomes a model for recognition—and obviously without resounding success—since the once of doing could not have taken, even if we still think that it should have. Harvey’s question is caught in a logic of regret misconstrued as melancholy, or the possible, insofar as moving forward can only ever be considered in a recurrent and never advancing relation to what has already passed.

Perhaps the most influential instance of historical consciousness as invocation and institution of the possible can be found in the writing of Marx and Engels. In their “Address to the Communist League” in 1850, Marx and Engels argue that the German workers must come to an understanding “as to what their class interests are, by taking up their position as an independent party as soon as possible and by not allowing themselves to be seduced for a single moment by the hypocritical phrases of the democratic bourgeois into refraining from the independent organization of the party of the proletariat. Their battle cry must be: The Revolution in Permanence.”²⁴ In imploring the proletariat to avoid the “hypocritical phrases” of the democratic bourgeois, Marx and Engels offer a hypocritical phrase of their own: the revolution in permanence. If the revolution is permanent, then it will become the norm. If it has become the norm, it is no longer a break but an essential way of being. “Revolution” comes, in this way, to redefine the experience of contingency as necessity, in which case the temporal and contextual specificity of every instance of struggle is subsumed by the belief in permanent revolution, since if it is to be permanent, each revolution will be the same revolution. If melancholia has a place here, it could only be as that which enables the shift from contingency to the appearance of necessity in what remains, nevertheless, contingent. Regret has no place in such a scenario. If we feel regret at having been seduced by the “hypocritical phrases” of the democratic bourgeois, the conviction promised and rewarded by the phrase “permanent revolution” means that we will never make a mistake again. However, as I understand it, regret has something better to teach us about our political struggles, since its chief virtue, as I will describe in chapter 1, is that it is an emotion that reawakens thought and trains us, in this way, against an expectation that what appears will always appear in the same way; this means, among other things, that the very notion of permanence will always stand in opposition to politics and political struggle. In place of permanence, including the permanence of failure (which is also implied in the very notion of revolution), we are better served to think about con-

tinuity. Continuity cannot be sustained by something like conviction. It requires instead an attentiveness to difference, both in the phenomenal realm of ordinary life and in the imagination of our political values in a genuinely contingent way, so as to resist the impulse to render a contingent articulation of the social as something necessary.

INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS, ASPECTUAL RELATIONS

It is probably clear by now that the theorization of regret presented here will have little to offer, by way of support, to the impulse in political discourse toward universal claims about political action, such as we find in Marx's call to permanent revolution.²⁵ I am expressly concerned about the way in which the conflation of contingent acts with necessary ones—as in the call for permanent revolution—come to mimic, by virtue of an unchecked and unreflective sense of conviction, transcendental operations. That said, I am in no way opposed to broader conceptions of the political, and I consider the view of hegemony articulated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, and refined further by Laclau in *On Populist Reason*, a source of inspiration. I do not take issue, for example, with Laclau's notion of the equivalential relation, by which we are said to de-emphasize our differences for the sake of instituting, as an instance of the political (which Laclau takes to be a representational order), a new and contingent ground of social relations on the basis of something that we all want and that we believe to be missing in the social as we currently experience it.²⁶ And we do so despite the differences that nevertheless remain between us—in view, but de-emphasized for some time. The chief merit of the equivalential relation, as the basis of Laclau's conception of hegemony, is that it gives us a way of understanding how large-scale shifts in the social—whether as revolution or by democratic election—can take place without a conception and experience of identification, in which political affiliation is a zero-sum game: *I have to believe all of it or none of it*. What the logic of the equivalential relation solves, among other things, is the problem rightly identified by Jean-Luc Nancy as an “operative community,” that is to say, an experience of community, or unification, that can only be achieved in and as death, since membership requires that I have every single thing in common with everyone else.²⁷

The theory of regret on offer here does not oppose such macro-conceptions of political change as we find in Laclau precisely because the universal aspect of hegemony, conceived as an equivalential relation, is offered expressly as a contingent articulation of the social and refuses in this way anything like an adherence to first principles. One of the consequences of this, as we know, is that hegemony is not guaranteed to any one strain of political belief; rather, it describes how any popular political formation might come into existence. For example, while Laclau's conception of hegemony and populism has had a major influence on movements such as *Podemos*, it could just easily explain—at the other end of the political spectrum—the increasing success (at the time of this writing) of Marine Le Pen and the Front National in France.²⁸ This is not a weakness in the theory of hegemony; instead, it is a sign of its sensitivity to the complexity of real politics, which are only ever ill understood in moralistic terms like “permanent revolution.” The contingent structures of political success regularly defy their content—or the specificity of each and every demand—as something essential to the structure itself. The demand matters, and it depends on the equivalential relation for its existence. However, no single demand can define, permanently or essentially, the logic of the equivalential relation *as such*.

In one sense, regret may very well play a role in the life of a hegemonic formation, insofar as it provides us with an opportunity to reevaluate our commitment, such that I might decide to emphasize something that I had de-emphasized before. Regret may be one emotion among others that helps us to understand when a particular social order has reached the end of its time. It may be that I come to regret privileging one thing at the expense of something else, which now feels more pressing. But I am struck, in this context, by a different role that regret might play in political theory and real politics, which will have a different bearing on macro-political thought. Curiously, Kierkegaard's brief reflection on regret in *Either/Or* indicates both what regret gives to thinking and how thought itself can acquire a political dimension, just not in every instance. Kierkegaard writes,

Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep over them, and you will also regret it. Laugh at the stupidities of the world or weep over them, you will regret it either way. Whether you laugh at the stupidities

of the world or you weep over them, you will regret it. Trust a girl, and you will regret it. Do not trust her, and you will also regret it. Trust a girl or do not trust her, you will regret it either way. Whether you trust a girl or do not trust her, you will regret it either way. Hang yourself, and you will regret it. Do not hang yourself, and you will also regret it. Hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. Whether you hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. This, gentleman, is the quintessence of all the wisdom of life. It is not merely in isolated moments that I, as Spinoza says, view everything *aeterno modo* [in the mode of eternity], but I am continually *aeterno modo*. Many believe they, too, are this when after doing one thing or another they unite or mediate these opposites. But this is a misunderstanding, for the true eternity does not lie behind either/or but before it. Their eternity will therefore also be a painful temporal sequence, since they will have a double regret on which to live. My wisdom is easy to grasp, for I have only one maxim, and even that is not a point of departure for me.²⁹

For Kierkegaard, regret becomes a way of understanding how thought itself—and thus philosophy—cannot have a proper point of departure, or an essential ground, which is how philosophy as the identification of first principles so often proceeds. That is to say, if we are concerned (as Kant was, for instance) to understand the conditions under which the world appears as the prerequisite to a moral use of the will, such as we see in *Critique of Pure Reason*, a particular instance of thought—or the name we give to any beginning as *the* beginning—becomes the ground upon which everything else can and must be known. For Kierkegaard, then, regret marks the self-consciousness of a beginning that can be anywhere, and thus rightly belongs to nowhere in particular. To act at all, to make a beginning that cannot ever really be one—or at least a beginning that is also not an origin—is to become conscious of having made a choice that will not result in the mediation of what is not chosen. For as Kierkegaard insists, eternity does not lie after a choice or decision that we make, as heroic or teleological resolution, but *before* it.

Along such lines, Kierkegaard goes on to say, “Experience shows that it is not at all difficult for philosophy to begin. Far from it. It begins, in fact, with nothing. But it is always difficult for philosophers to stop. This difficulty, too, I have avoided, for if anyone thinks that I, in stopping now,

actually stop, he demonstrates that he does not have speculative comprehension. The point is that I do not stop now, I stopped when I began.”³⁰ If Kierkegaard stopped when he began, which is what regret signals, he did so with the awareness that in beginning *somewhere* he produced a *something* that followed from this or that point of departure. Every beginning is a point of stopping that cannot help but continue exactly as it began. In this respect, every beginning would be something like an exergue, which Derrida describes in *Archive Fever* as that which “serves to stock in anticipation and to prearchive a lexicon, which, from there on, ought to lay down the law and give *the order*.”³¹ The exergue, Derrida argued, has in this way an “institutive and conservative function.”³² Whatever is placed in the beginning *as* the beginning will come to proscribe and arrogate to itself whatever follows, no matter how much or for how long.

And yet, in Kierkegaard’s enigmatic passage, regret figures importantly not as a corrective emotion that moves us from wrong to right, in which case the choice we make would mediate its opposite, so much so that regret would no longer be possible or necessary. Rather, regret marks the very decision and distinctiveness of thought itself, its limits and also the potential of an alternative that is only ever an alternative and never the ground of being or knowledge as such. While Kierkegaard’s litany of regrets gives the impression of nihilism, what the unrelenting negativity does instead is to refuse a dialectical conception of knowledge. If every decision warrants regret, and without exception, then each and every thought is followed by the affective registration of an alternative, of yet *another* place to begin. Thinking is situational, can and must begin anywhere, and will always be introduced to its limits, which means that no one thought will enclose or be enclosed by eternity, nor by mere appearance. Likewise, it should be said that “from anywhere” is not the same as “from nothing.” What is striking about Kierkegaard’s set of choices (if you choose *x*, you regret it; if you don’t choose *x*, you will regret it) is that it also defines a set of limits that come to describe the possible terms of a choice that can now be made. And perhaps most importantly, the indication of the terms and limits that describe choice does not come with any indication of what a best choice might be. In this way, Kierkegaard’s list of lists is a useful way of understanding choice within an institutional framework, especially since every institution is itself uniquely composed of a series of constitutive rules and concepts that are internal to that particular institution. Or as the legal theorist Corrado Roversi has put it, “In all of these

contexts [i.e., institutions], we must learn the relevant concepts in order to act meaningfully, and these concepts are *internal* in a peculiar way, in that for the most part they play a role only in the specific institutional setting they have been created for.”³³ In Roversi’s terms, any effort to determine the meaning or value of how one functions within any given institution cannot be decided—at least not necessarily—by larger social forms of valuation external to that institution, or what he calls “meta-institutional concepts.” That is to say, what counts as a good or a bad move within an institution cannot be decided with reference to forms of evaluation that are external to the logic of that institution.

Why does this matter? For one, if we understand institutions as things that are constituted uniquely by rules and concepts they do not share with other institutions, there is no correlative logic beyond the function of the rules and concepts internal to the institution that would guarantee any particular result or content generated by governing structures, forms, and possible procedures of that institution. Consider, for instance, the research university. Let’s say that one of my roles in the university is to continue to publish. In order to meet the standard of “research excellence,” a concept and a language specific to my institution (even if it is shared by others in similar terms), I am expected to publish the equivalent of two peer-reviewed articles per year. The institution is predicated, then, on an assumption that each member’s ability to meet this minimum will allow the institution to carry on meeting, in turn, a standard recognized by others, even though my institution determines those standards by itself and for itself. Since academic institutions comprise a variety of disciplines—some of which are necessarily unrelated, conceptually and thematically, to others—the specificity of what each of us who participate in the institution publishes can never be important to the functioning of the institution itself. It matters little to the institution if I publish a book on regret or a book on a French filmmaker, so long as an academic press that my institution recognizes as significant publishes my book. This is not to say that the content of the work any of us does, in this or that academic institution, does not matter. It is just that it does not matter to the functioning of the university as such. Rather, the specificity of the content of my work is what matters outside of my own institution. It is certainly the case, though, that how that content is received externally can increase or decrease the ease with which I function inside that institution, but even then only if that “success” is owed to a capability already

built into the internal logic of the institution in which I work. Indeed, this is one way of explaining how politically radical work—say, a book that calls for the forceful overthrow of every institution—regularly allows such writers to thrive within the very institutions that they nevertheless argue against. The popularity of such a work could very well foment a widespread revolutionary consciousness outside of the writer’s institution while nevertheless fortifying one’s place in that institution (and thus the institution itself)—that is to say, in an institution structurally similar, but never identical, to all of the ones described in that now widely circulated, influential work. And it would make no sense to describe such sequences as contradictory since there is no particular content demanded by the institution itself, only that the work be recognized by what the institution recognizes in turn, which is a form with no necessary content—but always *some* content.

In expressly political terms, then, this is why representative democracies are as frustrating as they are (or can be) vital, since the feeling of the former depends not on a dismantling of the rules and concepts that constitute a given form, but on a hegemonic relation to that form. If we return to Laclau’s equivalential relation, then, we can see how the dynamism of any hegemonic order depends on the particular content that becomes appealing within a given institution. The affective charge of disappointment in one political order or another effects a change in content but not necessarily in the rules and concepts that constitute that institution. Of course, it should be said that Laclau’s conception of hegemony functions just as well within institutional frameworks as it does in revolutionary contexts, in which one conceives of politics as a beginning from nowhere as opposed to the beginning from anywhere that would describe a choice one makes within a given institutional practice.³⁴ Regret certainly figures in both approaches. I can, for instance, come to regret my participation in an institution at every level, in which case what I do next will be a beginning from nowhere. What I do or what I build, in that scenario, will have no resemblance to the institution or institutions that I have forsaken in regret. I will say later what I take the limits of this approach to be. Instead, I am here mostly concerned to understand regret—whether in ethical or moral terms—as an affect better served by reformist politics, however unfashionable that may sound. Regret is, above all else, an intuition that comes too late—but nevertheless arrives—that we have not sufficiently understood the wider capacities of what we have already dismissed whole.

Thus, to return to the example of a representative democracy, any regret I feel on the basis of a decision I made within that institutional framework will not lead me to imagine an entirely different mode of political organization, just a different organizer. If I come to regret a decision I made to support one particular candidate, party, or social policy—and do not regard the effects of that bad decision as a result of a representative democratic system as an institutional form—I can emphasize more what I had de-emphasized earlier in an effort to make a change. As an affective registration of consciousness, regret—as a political emotion—contributes significantly to the dawning of a new aspect, in Wittgenstein’s terms, or to a discursive shift, in the terms of Laclau and Mouffe. The aspectual and the discursive are important and importantly related concepts for this book. What the concept of discourse shares with the aspectual, in particular, is a refusal of normative epistemologies and an attendant recognition that an object only ever acquires meaning in relation to the social or perceptual context in which it operates. The meaning or valuation of an object remains independent of that operation, such that any object can—and likely will—acquire a different meaning in time than the one it has for us in the present, even if nothing in the object itself undergoes a transformation. For instance, in an early defense of their theory of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe give the following example to explain how the aspectual and discursive function: “If I kick a spherical object in the street or if I kick a ball in the football match, the *physical* fact is the same, but its meaning is different. The object is a football only to the extent that it establishes a system of relations with other objects, and these relations are not given by the mere referential materiality of the objects but are, rather, socially constructed.”³⁵ The distinction between a spherical object in the street and a “football” results not, as Laclau and Mouffe make clear, from any inherent feature of the object but by way of a hegemonic, equivalential relation that indicates a particular way of doing and comprehending what is done. This is also one reason that films come to take, at points in this book, a privileged status as examples, even if this is not a work of film theory, properly speaking, since the work of film is itself always aspectual. That is to say, how we understand a single image—one that does not change—will depend entirely on the shots that surround it. In Laclau and Mouffe’s account of hegemony, however, we have more than just a relation between images. It is a contingent totality made up of linguistic signs (scoreboards, verbal commands, play calls) and non-linguistic signs (kick-

ing, goal-keeping, running), which frames our perception of the spherical object as a football and that depends in turn on our own de-emphasis of the “non-football” aspects that would, in a different context, allow us to apprehend the very same object as the equivalent of a freestanding stone lying in the road. In that case, I may carry on kicking the thing, but that kick will more likely signify my boredom than it will my participation in an actual game. But it is important to emphasize here that this particular sign of my boredom or else my role as player in a football game is subject to even more flexibility than Laclau and Mouffe themselves needed to indicate the contingency of “meaning” in any hegemonic formation and, ultimately, the contingency of the subject itself.

For example, in their explanation of the independence of the object from what nevertheless frames that object in a particular way, Laclau and Mouffe insist on the determining characteristic of discourse or the aspectual.

A diamond in the market or at the bottom of a mine is the same physical object; but, again, it is only a commodity within a determinate system of social relations. For that same reason it is the discourse which constitutes the subject position of the social agent, and not, therefore, the social agent which is the origin of discourse—the same system of rules that makes that spherical object into a football, makes me a player. The existence of objects is independent of their discursive articulation to such a point, that we could make of that mere existence—that is, existence extraneous to any meaning—the point of departure of social analysis.³⁶

Laclau and Mouffe rightly depend on a conception of the subject for the working of any hegemonic order and are careful, as we have seen, to indicate that those determinations are themselves contingent and in no sense necessary. However, of note here is the way in which these social relations—which are, nevertheless, determined aspectually or discursively in the constitution of the subject—take on the appearance of necessity. That is, one is either a player *or* an idler, despite the fact that one can be either at any time. In de-emphasizing this or that feature of my beliefs and desires, which also have a bearing on how the world appears and works for me, if not others, I occupy a particular role. I have agency in ways that are defined in relation to the system that has determined that role, even though it has done so contingently, and despite the fact that my embrace of this or

that social order is predicated on de-emphasizing whatever distinguishes me from others within the same set of terms that I have agreed to in being bound to others in a hegemonic relation. Within the context of political change, then, from an institutional perspective, we would have to say that the process of being determined as a football player (as opposed to a street idler) carries with it a presumption that one accepts whole the particular ways of playing within that very institution, and the difference is what is left behind precisely so this institution can become legible and, most importantly, work. In other words, we assume that the rules of the institution that have been constituted contingently—and owing to the determining character of the social relation that has taken aspectual hold—define in transparent terms how one plays the game or what exactly one's role in the game is. And yet what makes institutions so difficult to evaluate at the moment in which one contemplates the question of reform or revolution has everything to do with the difficulty of telling the character of an institution apart from the people who inhabit it in particular ways.

For example, must I give up on representational democracy simply because the rules that constitute it can justify an effect (for example, the refusal, as we saw at the end of 2016, to entertain a presidential nominee for the Supreme Court) that I strongly oppose? How can I be sure that the bylaws of an institution guarantee a particular action or outcome? Put this way, regret could, of course, eventually allow us to see that there is something wrong in the constituted nature of the institution itself and could provoke, on the basis of our disappointment with what we decided in error, more revolutionary forms of action and subsequent institution building. But regret may also be a form of aspect dawning, in which case my decision or action—which I now regard as a mistake—can shift. I might change my mind about how I will act within the institution. And if I have the ability to take on a different role or way of being within an institution, then I should also be able to see that the institution is more capacious than I had imagined at first. Thus I may be compelled to pause before opting out altogether, knowing, as I now do, that the institution is constituted by its own unique rules that are internal, and that the roles to be played (defender, center back, sweeper) are determined by that logic, and yet my identity is in no sense determined in an absolute way by those rules or roles. A part of the political utility of regret, then, has to do with the way in which it affords us the opportunity, in time and as a result of our own capacity to remain thoughtful, to determine what the limits of

any institution might be before we move to destroy it, especially since so many ideas about revolution are always already possible.

The scope of this book is admittedly much smaller than, say, a reckoning with hegemony, a theory of capital, neoliberalism, or, for that matter, communism—though none of those things is entirely off the table either. I am concerned instead to consider the way that regret allows us to understand our relation to the institutions we occupy and, most importantly, that we want to go on occupying, albeit with a better sense of what the institution at hand does and also how we might clarify our demands with respect to what the limits of an institution allow for in ways that are agreeable, if also never fully satisfying. It is my sense that when we speak in one way or another about burning down institutions, we typically mean the one that we do not occupy or recognize, for ourselves, as valuing. It seems to me that this has something to do with the fact that we expect our institutions as well as our reasons for belonging to them to be perfectly correlated and thus never a cause for regret.

BUREAUCRACIES

Given the institutional orientation of my theory of regret, the book is also a meditation on bureaucracy. For one, our confrontation with bureaucracy—if there can be said to be a typical character of the experience—is something that always occurs in medias res and very often leaves us with an unsteady feeling of regret. That is, when we come to the recognition of a problem that we believe to have an institutional history, or at least a series of related causes, we find ourselves before a bureaucrat, whether in the personage of a phone representative with whom I begin to dispute an erroneous charge on my phone bill, perhaps an immigration agent who can help explain why I have been categorized in one way and not another (to my detriment), or else a dean who comes to a faculty meeting ostensibly to seek the faculty's counsel on an administrative decision that has already been made—to cite a few ordinary examples. No matter the case, it seems to me that one of the most ordinary experiences of a bureaucracy involves what we take to be the presentation of disinformation in response to an irritable demand, our own, for clarification and reason. In our exchange with the bureaucrat, we hope that we will quickly be made privy in a clear way to the causal chain that has thus far eluded us

or the bureaucrat. We hope that we can restore what has gone missing just as we once knew it to be and that what gets restored—as this missing causal chain—will be indistinguishable from how we previously imagined it to be. Likewise, when most of us are greeted with what we think is disinformation at the moment we demand clarification, we often charge the bureaucrat with stupidity, on the assumption that he or she is either blindly following the rules of the bureaucracy or else is in ignorance of them. Whether we say so to ourselves or voice it to the bureaucrat, we get nowhere; we are sent instead to yet one more window, one more phone operator, or we are left with our own rage, which can only follow from what we take to be our conviction: we know, above all else, that we are right, just not why. That is to say, we believe that every institution is knowable in relation to what we take institutions, in general, to be. When we confront a bureaucracy, what we expect is a complete system of knowledge, either to be revealed to us or to be hidden completely if the answer never comes. Despite our tendency to regard bureaucracies as networks of dissimulation, we believe that the work of dissimulation itself—the shifting of appearance—covers over what can and must be known whole. We believe that the aspect change initiated by a bureaucracy covers over something stable and true, a real foundation. One odd, and also common, effect of this is that we regularly assume that the relation between bureaucrat and bureaucracy is a transparent one, that the bureaucrat is in full knowledge of how the institution works and what, precisely, their role in the larger working of the bureaucracy is, even if the bureaucrat's job is to prevent others from knowing how to navigate the institution successfully in the terms one expects in advance. This doesn't strike me as an unusual description of how bureaucrats and bureaucracies work, but it does not—as either idea or attendant attitude—stand as a proof of bureaucratic relations everywhere. There are people who can be described as bureaucrats whose job it is to prevent us from righting a wrong or merely clearing up a clerical error causing us some amount of grief; there are also people one can describe as bureaucrats who see it as their job to allow for a clearer passage through this or that institution, or even work to make the institution itself function better, more like the one we want to believe in and be supported by. It would be of no use, for instance, simply to complain about a particular bad administrator as proof of the problem of administration in general. Such complaints—however warranted they feel and sometimes, in fact, are—typically have the effect of ratifying the

very thing we most despise, since all that we are shown in such instances is what we have only ever believed in the first place.

What I am interested in here is what regret makes possible in these moments of institutional instability, which can be as productive as they are detrimental. As Ben Kafka has shown, bureaucracy is a textual phenomenon, a matter of signification, before all else. In his remarkable study of bureaucracy, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork*, Kafka examines the “psychic life of paperwork.”³⁷ Where others have only ever been concerned to regard bureaucracy as an expression of the repressive force of administration, Kafka has privileged instead—and without denying the repressive potential of any bureaucracy—the instability of writing as the stuff of bureaucracy, a textual undecidability on the order of Derridean *différance*, one that can loosen the grip of administrative power just as much as it can tighten it. Rather strikingly, Kafka notes, for instance, that the term “bureaucracy” emerged in 1764, in an issue of Melchior von Grimm’s *Correspondance littéraire*, as a pun. Kafka writes,

Grimm recounted [in that issue] how Gournay had once remarked to him that “we have in France an illness that takes a terrible toll; this illness is called bureaumania.” He even described this mania as a “fourth or fifth form of government, by the name of bureaucracy.”

This new word “bureaucracy” simultaneously invoked and violated a well-worn semiotic code. To the classic three regimes, democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy—that is, rule by the many, the few, and the one—Gournay had now added rule by a piece of furniture. The piece of furniture was expandable, metonymically, to include the men who sat behind it, the offices in which they found themselves, and ultimately the entire state apparatus. More than an ordinary neologism, “bureaucracy” was a pun, a “rattling of the semiotic chain,” as Lacan says.³⁸

As a pun, “bureaucracy” describes both order—the geometric regularity and categorical distinctiveness of each drawer that is nevertheless related to the whole of the desk—and the defiance of that order in the undecidability of the writing that gets classified there, and becomes subject, as Kafka importantly observes, to “the material and semiotic exigencies of *différance*.”³⁹ As a pun, “bureaucracy” perfectly describes the difference between knowledge as a stable foundation beyond dispute and thinking as an ongoing process of relating what we see to material sources that

can never secure what any instance of signification features as a point of contact, as a proposed relation. A bureaucracy might very well be like an interlocking series of drawers beneath the desktop of a functionary, but only that. If it is *like* a chest of drawers, it is also never a chest of drawers; thus, how we imagine any relation of power and also our agency within that network of relations can be determined not by first principles, but by a capacity to think, by our faculty for analogy, knowing as we do that none of these relations can be held as permanent, essential, or merely beyond dispute. In this sense, which is what Ben Kafka demonstrates, the instability of signification can enable the binding power of the bureaucrat, but it can also unburden, by way of a different reading of the same mark, the one who has, up until now, been tracked and thus controlled in some way by a bureaucracy. Most importantly, what it suggests is that politics only ever takes place as a problem of signification that cannot be solved as a problem of signification, lest thinking disappear as a function of the solution offered.

Disputing Pierre Rosanvallon's reading of instances of French humor about bureaucratic struggle since the French Revolution, which Rosanvallon takes to be common expressions of the hopelessness that one has felt—and regularly still feels—in the face of this or that bureaucratic order, Kafka points out something more important about such tales: “The stories about ‘bureaucracy’ are not the signs of a failure of intellection; they are one of the forms that intellection takes.”⁴⁰ This, in many ways, is where my own reflection on bureaucracy begins, and precisely as a related theory of regret. One of the main provocations of *A Theory of Regret* is simply to ask what happens when we cease to regard the bureaucrat as always already stupid and instead regard her/him as someone capable of thinking. Kafka's book provides a very strong justification for such a question. It is not that I want to argue that bureaucracy is always an experience of thoughtfulness. That would be absurd. I take it for granted that many bureaucracies produce the dissimulations or obfuscations that they do simply to carry on the work of accumulation and alienation that we often assume of them. This is certainly in line with how David Graeber has pursued the contemporary form of bureaucracy when he writes,

In contemporary American populism—and increasingly, in the rest of the world as well—there can only be one alternative to “bureaucracy,” and that is “the market.” Sometimes this is held to mean we should

simply get the bureaucrats out of the way and let nature take its course, which means letting people attend the business of their lives untrammelled by endless rules and regulations imposed on them from above, and so allowing the magic of the marketplace to provide its own solutions. “Democracy” thus came to mean the market; “bureaucracy,” in turn, government interference with the market; and this is pretty much what the word continues to mean today.⁴¹

To be clear, Graeber is not honoring the distinction but reporting on what he takes to be a commonplace assumption about bureaucracy. His own view seems to favor the idea that markets and governmental bureaucracies are now more fused than ever: “This process—the gradual fusion of public and private power into a single entity, rife with rules and regulations whose ultimate purpose is to extract wealth in the form of profits—does not yet have a name.”⁴² Yet, whether one takes the commonplace assumption (should such a thing actually exist) that bureaucracies are governmental agencies that stand in the way of nature, perversely understood here as the free play of the marketplace, or one assumes that bureaucracies are the very way in which the marketplace becomes protected by government for the sake of oligopolies and radical economic inequality, one thing remains true in both accounts: namely, “bureaucracy” is simply the name for the “truth” of government and governmental institutions, which concerns its preoccupation with the maintenance and production of radical inequality. Indeed, the critique of bureaucracy is quite often a critique of governmental institutions as such. And yet, as Meghan Sutherland points out in “The Aporetic Apparatus,” many international forms of contemporary protest are less inclined to call for an end to all forms of governmentality and governmental institutions than they are concerned with their better functioning. “Although it has become a commonplace of critical and cultural theory to treat the instruments of governance and institutional order as antithetical to and suppressive of any meaningful political activity—in other words, institutions and orders are what political dissent is understood to destabilize, not the other way around—it is precisely such instruments and orders that concern the most fervent political demands of populations around the world at the moment.”⁴³ As an example, she cites—among many others—the “You Stink Movement” in Beirut, which involved above all a demand for proper trash removal services, and the Black Lives Matter movement and its call

for police to “uphold their duty as police, that government institutions ensure the rights they promise citizens.”⁴⁴

One way of taking seriously the idea that it is not the absence of government that we need follows from the recognition that there is no bureaucracy *in itself*. If you fail to find a definition of bureaucracy in these pages, it is because such a definition could only ever work to produce a way of seeing, a mode of identification, which is precisely what we need to guard against and is precisely what we always accuse the bureaucrat and a bureaucracy of doing. If we think of a bureaucracy as something that moves continuously, then any given instance will never be well described by a list of stable, related conditions. If we take seriously the idea that the bureaucrat is capable of thinking, then we will have a way of keeping up with the bureaucrat where we might otherwise remain subject to an appearance that is only ever meant to cover over what the bureaucrat—if he or she is in service of a loathsome project—believes us to be too stupid to comprehend. If we are assumed to be too stupid to comprehend what the bureaucrat shows, then we will also be understood to be incapable of a meaningful intervention. In fact, it will be shown in chapter 3 that most emancipatory theories of thinking on offer in the continental tradition understand thinking itself as a form of withdrawal. What can we make of the fact, I will ask, that our most cherished theories of thinking as a withdrawal from appearance, from those of Martin Heidegger to Catherine Malabou, resemble our most ordinary descriptions of bureaucracy?

Regret, as we will see, also involves a withdrawal from appearance and one that gets caught up, at times, with what we so often wrongly describe as hypocrisy. And while I began this introduction by citing one infamous bureaucrat’s claim for the absence of all regret, I did not do so in order to stage this inquiry as one that only concerns world historical figures and fascist politics. Every single one of us, I would wager, references regret whenever we want to secure an instance of dissimulation. For instance, if I do not want to go to a dinner party, simply because I would just rather stay home and watch basketball, I may send the host my regrets.⁴⁵ In this case, in sending my regrets, not only do I state, in the terms of a euphemism, that I cannot attend, but I imply in the same gesture that I am doing something that is, in fact, important, or at least previously agreed upon in a way that is now understandably binding, when in fact all I want to do is stay on the couch. I also presume, in the cover that my regret offers me as polite response, that my host would not understand just how

significant basketball is to me—that it is something that must be concealed about me if I am to be taken seriously and invited to such things again. Probably, if I send such regrets, I will also feel genuine regret about my minor act of dissimulation, about giving an appearance at a distance that can easily be read against my wishes (since we all recognize the trope as social custom), and also because it should be possible to tell my acquaintance that basketball, sometimes, is very important to me. And on a slightly larger political scale, I would say that until we have some better sense not only of *what* is important to us and to each other but also *why*, and of how all of the things we care about may bear no obvious relation to each other or to anything else, we will continue to substitute the voicing of first principles (the supposedly unassailable truths of the left and of the right) in place of genuine conversation, or at least, consideration for anyone other than the ones with whom we know we identify completely.

This is a political problem that can be understood, for many of us, in the experience of writing and of being read. One of the burdens of writing, as I experience it, involves a reflection in advance of what I might regret, having said *x* or *y*: *I've said this but does it make sense beyond the fact that it makes sense to me? How could this matter if I'm saying this and no one else has already?* Of course, the only way to solve that problem is to be sure that what one wants to say is said in a way that makes sense, precisely because it has been said before, or run the risk of the category mistake. Or else, if we believe that knowledge is the ground and aim of thinking, that knowledge is simply there to be discovered in the process of research, I can only wait longer—always longer—to say whatever it is that I will say, which I take to be a different kind of diletantism, since thought takes time but cannot be completed, or given access to completion, in time. But if I heed such warnings—the very ones that I am first to give myself before I hear the same from others—what happens? One answer to this question is offered in chapter 2, where I consider mentorship to be a form of bureaucracy, and the answer, I'll say in advance, is “not much.” Regret is one of the important things that the practice of writing has to share with the practice of politics, not to mention ordinary acts of sociability.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Adolf Eichmann, "Eichmann's Own Story: 'To Sum It All Up, I Regret Nothing,'" *Life Magazine*, December 5, 1960, 161. The emphasis is mine.
- 2 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 22.
- 3 Richard Rorty, "Ethics without Principles," chap. 4 in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), 80.
- 4 Eichmann, "Eichmann's Own Story," 158.
- 5 Eichmann, "Eichmann's Own Story," 150.
- 6 Janet Landman, *Regret: The Persistence of the Possible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 257.
- 7 For a general survey and analysis of such claims, see Thomas Hurka, "Monism, Pluralism, and Rational Regret," *Ethics* 106 (April 1996): 555–575.
- 8 Hurka, "Monism, Pluralism, and Rational Regret," 560.
- 9 Hurka, "Monism, Pluralism, and Rational Regret," 559.
- 10 Rorty, "Ethics without Principles," 79.
- 11 Rorty, "Ethics without Principles," 79.
- 12 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 149.
- 13 Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003), 180.
- 14 Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 163.
- 15 Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 188.
- 16 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1994), 245.
- 17 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 245.
- 18 Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 58.
- 19 Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, 66.

- 20 Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, 67.
- 21 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 243.
- 22 Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," in *Contemporary Marxist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Andrew Pendakis, Jeff Diamanti, Nicholas Brown, and Imre Szeman (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 556.
- 23 David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 227.
- 24 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Address to the Communist League," in Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 285.
- 25 Repeated, for instance, as the title of a book by Leon Trotsky, *Permanent Revolution & Results and Prospects* (Seattle: Red Letter Press, 2010).
- 26 See, for instance, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 2014); Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2007); and Ernesto Laclau, "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?," chap. 3 in *Emancipation(s)* (New York: Verso, 2007).
- 27 Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Inoperative Community," in *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
- 28 Gilles Tremlett, "The Podemos Revolution: How a Small Group of Radical Academics Changed European Politics," *The Guardian*, March 31, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/31/podemos-revolution-radical-academics-changed-european-politics>.
- 29 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 38–39.
- 30 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 40.
- 31 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 7.
- 32 Derrida, *Archive Fever*.
- 33 Corrado Rovorsi, "Conceptualizing Institutions," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 13, no. 1 (2014): 201.
- 34 I owe this point to Meghan Sutherland.
- 35 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without Apologies," *New Left Review* 166 (November/December 1987): 82.
- 36 Laclau and Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without Apologies," 82–83.
- 37 Ben Kafka, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork* (New York: Zone Books, 2012).
- 38 Kafka, *Demon of Writing*, 77.
- 39 Kafka, *Demon of Writing*, 111.
- 40 Kafka, *Demon of Writing*, 85.
- 41 David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2015), 11.
- 42 Graeber, *Utopia of Rules*, 17.

- 43 Meghan Sutherland, “The Aporetic Apparatus,” *World Picture* 12 (winter 2017), http://worldpicturejournal.com/WP_12/Sutherland.html.
- 44 Sutherland, “Aporetic Apparatus.”
- 45 Thanks to Eugenie Brinkema for reminding me of this odd custom.

CHAPTER ONE: WHAT IS REGRET?

- 1 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2nd ed., trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 18.
- 2 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.
- 3 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.
- 4 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 25.
- 5 The solution to virtuosity itself, insofar as virtuosity can only ever remain within the limits of a medium or a technical form, is what Alexander García Düttmann has described as “aesthetic seriousness,” which occurs at the moment in which intention breaks off at the limits of possibility. See Alexander García Düttmann, *Visconti: Insights into Flesh and Blood* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
- 6 Quoted in Susan Saulny, “Woman Claims Affair with Cain, and He Denies It,” *New York Times*, November 29, 2011, A19.
- 7 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 26.
- 8 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 27.
- 9 I am, of course, aware of the many problems that have arisen in conceptions of “the will.” And yet, as I hope remains at least consistently implicit throughout this book, I’m not especially convinced that we can produce political change, or even sustain a political order that we continue to favor, without a notion of the will in place. In this respect, I am in complete agreement with a very important distinction that Peter Hallward has made, with respect to Fanon, between political *will* and political *compulsion*. Or as he puts it, “A consistent voluntarism requires, first, that political will be considered as a matter of volition or *will*, rather than compulsion, coercion, or ‘instinct.’ Voluntary action is a matter of free deliberation and prescription. Political will is thought through: it subsumes a ‘spontaneous’ enthusiasm or rebellion in an organized mobilization or a disciplined campaign.”
- Hallward’s concern to emphasize thoughtfulness and reflection as a primary feature of political will is precisely where regret figures into any use of the will, in my own account. See Peter Hallward, “Fanon and Political Will,” *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2011): 107.
- 10 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 32.
- 11 I should point out that my conception of an aspect, here and elsewhere in the book, is of an aggregate variety. That is to say, in Wittgenstein’s terms, if we agree on an aspect then we are either seeing *as duck* or seeing *as rabbit*—we are seeing parts that can be read differently but are now being read—and more or