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**Between Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger
Reiner Schürmann's Undecidable Remarks on the Political**

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Abstract: This essay focuses on Reiner Schürmann's undecidable remarks on the political, which can be traced in his work from the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties. While Schürmann's later work (leading to and including *Broken Hegemonies*) touches on similar issues, and generates its own hesitations and vacillations, it is principally during the earlier period that the specific problem surrounding the political is extensively thematized by him. The essay will show in what way Schürmann's work from this period vacillates between, on the one hand, privileging political life as a permanent guarantor for public visibility and human action and, on the other, a mode of being and acting that has no sufficient reason to exist at all, and could as easily disappear. These two contrasting judgments will be thought in light of what can be understood as the fate and finitude of the political. In order to situate a critical exploration of Schürmann's remarks on the historical-ontological status of political life, the essay will begin by considering a correspondence that took place between Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger. While Jaspers, it will be shown, understands the political to be a permanent sphere of human activity, Heidegger radically historicizes its importance, concluding with the disquieting gesture that the political realm may have played itself out. Crucially, for the purposes of an investigation into Schürmann, who tasked himself with drawing out the implications of Heidegger's rethematization of the question of being for thinking and acting, these distinct positions on the nature of the political are never resolved in his writings, but show up as signs of a deep hesitation regarding the fate of the political at the end of metaphysics.

Keywords: History of being; the political; finitude; ontology; anarchy; thinking and acting.

An excess of light...is the horror of night.¹
Reiner Schürmann

This essay critically explores Reiner Schürmann's undecidable remarks on the political. To approach this critical exploration requires that his hesitations are situated within a more clearly delineated – though for all that speculative – problem surrounding what

I will describe as the fate of the political. In speaking of the fate of the political, immediate attention needs to be paid to the double genitive operative here, inasmuch that the political can be read either as the subject or object of this locution. On the one hand, it points to the fate of phenomena that the political is responsible for displaying, for putting them into and out of play. On the other hand, the phrase contains what doubtlessly, for some, may prove more

¹ Reiner Schürmann, "On Judging and its Issue," in *The Public Realm: Essays on Discursive Types in Political Philosophy*, ed. Reiner Schürmann, New York, NY: State University of New York Press 1989, p.16.

disconcerting, since it broaches the possibility that the political is itself fated, that its very own display might have outplayed itself. The question to be posed is whether the political can ever be said to have eclipsed itself? This second interpretive possibility, which I inquire into below, will open up for an investigation into the finitude of the political.

What then might it mean to speak of the political's fate (that is, its destiny and its destination) in terms of its own finitude, both with respect to where humans stand today and, more specifically from where Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger stood after the horrors of the second world war, as well as from where Schürmann would later stand at the very end of what the British historian, Eric Hobsbawm, refers to as "the short twentieth century"?² This inquiry will be carried out in three parts. I begin by setting out four principal ways in which the fate of the political can be reflected upon. This general circumscription of the problem will then be rerouted into a specific correspondence between Jaspers and Heidegger after the Second World War, which touches incisively on the very status, both ontologically and historically, of the political. Significantly, Jaspers and Heidegger reach contrasting positions on the issue. In the third and most substantive section, I critically explore Schürmann's undecidable and vacillating remarks on the political, both in light of the general elucidation of the problem sketched in the first part and in relation to the specific opposition between Jaspers and Heidegger on the problem.

Throughout this inquiry, I couch the problem in terms of the awkward linguistic construction, "the political." This is done, as far as possible, to avoid any confusion with politics as such. Which means that, following the distinction that has been formed in many languages (in French, and German, for example), "the political" will be taken as a general designator that encompasses all kinds of relations, practices, and institutions, as opposed to "politics" that is to be kept for singular instances of action, such as the politics of a General Strike or the politics of Rosa Luxemburg, and so on. Admittedly, by the end of this essay, there will be reason to note how, at certain places in Schürmann's work, the distinction between "the political" as a generalizing adjectival noun and the singular nomination of a "politics"

becomes both unstable and at times indiscernible.

From the outset, I fully acknowledge the risks being taken in posing the problem of the political's fate (that is, its destiny and destination), not least when exploring the thought of Schürmann, in whose work the whole thematic of fate, destiny, and destination would lodge itself in the throat like an unwanted fishbone. This is especially so, since such loose and careless talk runs more than the risk of being drawn into teleological, eschatological schemata—that are structured around first causes and principles, ultimate ends, definitive breaks—all of which Schürmann's work so adroitly evacuates in his deconstruction of the relations between thinking and acting as they are reposed within a reexamination of the *Seinsfrage* that Heidegger had opened up. I will nonetheless insist on obstinately following this line of questioning, if for nothing else than as a reminder that the political is an unsettling question. And for many concerned people today, current political developments around the globe are unsettling. The unsettling nature of the question was one Jaspers, Heidegger, and Schürmann were alert to as well, as I will aim to show. It should be noted here that the line of questioning being pursued here is, in some notable respects, a return to some of the post-Heideggerian themes Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy discussed in the early 1980s, under the wider inquiry into the retreat of the political. This meant for them, the task of reexamining the political during a period when its specificity seemed to withdraw from view. On occasions, Lacoue-Labarthe specifically took up the twin issues of the fate and the finitude of the political through a serious examination of Heidegger and his political thinking—one that remains both of a piece with but significantly different from Schürmann's own inquiries, which were undertaken at around the same time.³

The General Problem of the Fate of the Political

To begin, I shall first delineate briefly the contours of a general problem. In speaking of the fate of the political, one should hear at the same time four possible conjectures. The first can be put as follows:

³ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe "Transcendence Ends in Politics," transl. Eugenio Donato, in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1989, pp. 267-300, here p. 289.

² Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, London, UK: Abacus 1994, p. 3.

1. The political sphere will accomplish itself in having realized a particular form, a specific *politiea*, as the highest and most perfected form of political belonging.

In this conjecture, the phrase "the fate of the political" is best put in the traditional metaphysical language: the fate of the political would be secured once the essence of the political finally coincides with its actual existence in a politics—that is, once the ontological ordering of the political as such finds its utmost and complete expression in some kind of ontic order of politics. For example, after the end of the cold war, liberal democracy was proclaimed as the natural and highest form of the just political state; social democracy came to have the same function in certain western and northern European countries after the end of the Second World War; previously, republicanism took on this mantle during and after the revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century. Thus, the fate of the political means here having realized its own destination, *telos*, with respect to possibilities that are stamped within and by it. One can trace this operation all the way back to Book 3 of Aristotle's *Politics*, where the description of different political constitutions is overdetermined by a prescription regarding the best of them, which will optimize excellence in action, human flourishing, and order within the city. In this first rendering of the question about the fate of the political, what is not in doubt is the very need, the necessity for political life.

A second conjecture in the interpretation of the fate of the political is to question the very fundamentals of its ontological predestination. This interpretation proceeds as follows:

2. The political has specific historical conditions of existence. Insofar as it does not give rise to itself, but its genesis and conditions of possibility lay elsewhere (for example, the *oikos*, the social, the economic (in the modern sense), the cultural, history, and so on), the political cannot be understood as a self-standing, autonomous domain. It is itself a conditioned instance. On point of fact of being conditioned, it does not have its fate in its own hands. Its fate lies in processes, modes of relation, and fields of practice outside of its control. Here, the fate of the political implies its own finitude. Just as it comes to exist as a contingent event (namely, as something that has its conditions of existence outside of itself), there is no sufficient and necessary reason why the political realm cannot fade away,

disappear, or wane. This second possibility, however, lends itself to two quite different judgments. The first, one can say, follows an emancipatory-eschatological line. It can be briefly summarized as follows:

3. The political will have come to an end once the truth that the political realm establishes (in terms of its constitutions, its laws, its statutes of political right, that secure conditions for membership of a community) has been exposed as a fiction—once relations of exclusion, domination, inequality are pulled from other spheres of existence, and the struggle between rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed, bondsman and slave, capitalist and proletariat, is fought in the open.

The promise incubated in emancipatory politics is the end of social injustices and economic inequalities that the well-ordered political regime (inculcated in the State, public authorities, institutions, and so on) justifies and perpetuates. It is a politics that aims at the negation of the political, whose very conditions of existence depend on disavowing its own dependence on economic exploitation, domestic reproductive labor, servitude, and relations of basic subsistence. This means that an emancipatory politics will negate what the political disavows: through determinate negation (that is, the negation of negation), real human social existence will be reconciled with itself—real human emancipation will supplant mere political freedom. This thought, notably incubated in the Saint-Simonian school and originally coined by Auguste Comte, "from the government of men to the administration of things," is carried over into Marxist claims surrounding the advent of Communism.⁴ For some, it represents utopic dreams or horizons to aim toward. To others, as Hannah Arendt would quip, such thoughts are "simply appalling."⁵ In this context, the early writings of Karl Marx are illuminative, especially between the years of 1843 and 1844 (from his early critical engagement with G. F. W. Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* up to his *On the Jewish Question*), which would continually encircle the fiction of

⁴ Ben Kafka, "The Administration of Things: A Genealogy," *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* (21 May 2012), <https://west86th.bgc.bard.edu/articles/the-administration-of-things-a-genealogy/>.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, "Introduction into Politics," in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn, New York, NY: Schocken Books 2005, pp. 93–200, here p. 153.

the political, exposing it to its social and material conditions. Marx writes famously in his critical remarks on Arnold Ruge:

All revolution—the *overthrow* of the existing ruling power and the *dissolution* of the old order—is a *political act*. But without revolution *socialism* cannot be made possible. It stands in need of this political act just as it stands in need of *destruction* and *dissolution*. But as soon as its *organizing functions* begin and its *goal*, its *soul* emerges, socialism throws its *political mask* aside.⁶

There is a further and final way to think the fate of the political that, while fundamentally questioning the autonomy and necessity of the political, dispenses with the eschatological hope of a politics securing for itself its own annulment through its ultimate victory in self-overcoming. This way of approaching the issue starts instead with a question:

4. Might it be the case that the political has possibly already come to an end before it has reached its Ends? Which is to say, the closure of the political is not because it has accomplished or completed itself, nor because an emancipatory politics has shown and overcome the fiction of the political by installing a higher order of social co-existence, but because of an emerging hollowing out of both the meaning and direction of political life, that is, an increasing and persistent sense of impotency and wariness that it does not accomplish anything. The fate of the political thus invokes a sense of exhaustion, torpidity, and lassitude; the political is itself fated.

Here in the last of these conjectures, the motif of the finitude of the political is radicalized to its utmost point. It is specifically this unsettling proposition that I shall focus on for the remainder of my inquiry. From where does the legitimacy of this thesis arise, if at all? And where to situate Heidegger, Jaspers and Schürmann within this unsettling thought?

The Political as the Disclosure of History or as Historically Closed – The Case of Jaspers and Heidegger

In order to situate the above general problematic within the tracks of a living problem, and to allow for a better understanding of Schürmann's undecidable remarks on the issue, I will revisit a fraught

correspondence between Jaspers and Heidegger that took place between 1950 and 1952.

The intellectual kinship between Jaspers and Heidegger prior to Heidegger's political decision to take up the rectorship at Freiburg and his membership in the National Socialist German Workers' Party in 1933 is well known, along with all that followed it. By 1936, any kind of contact between them had stopped. In a 1948 letter to Heidegger that is marked "not sent," Jaspers writes:

The good memories that bind us together from a world long passed away are not extinguished for me. In the meantime, we have lived since 1933 without contact and in different worlds. A factual break has ensued, after which a wordless link to something past is not very well possible.⁷

After a lengthy hiatus, in 1949, Jaspers acting from a "faith in communication" that he believed to share with Heidegger, whom he considered a friend, signs his letter:

I greet you from a distant past, from beyond an abyss of the times, holding steadfast to that something that was and that could not be nothing.⁸

So begins a cautious recommencement of a philosophical dialogue, much left unsaid in what was said. Then, in 1950, after barely a word about his deeds done from 1933 to 1936, Heidegger broke his silence, first by communicating to Jaspers the shame he felt toward him and his wife, which had led him to sever all communication with them both. Jaspers replied in a conciliatory manner when he wrote:

You will excuse me when I say what I sometimes thought: that you seemed to behave toward the manifestations of National Socialism like a boy who dreams, who doesn't know what he is doing, who doesn't know how blindly and forgetfully he gets mixed up in an undertaking that looks to him like

⁷ Karl Jaspers, "Dear Heidegger! Heidelberg, March 1, 1948," in *The Heidegger-Jaspers Correspondence (1920-1963)*, transl. Gary E. Aylesworth, eds. Walter Biemel and Hans Saner, Amherst, NY: Humanity Books 2003, pp. 158-60, here p. 159.

⁸ Karl Jaspers, "Dear Heidegger! Basel, February 6, 1949," in *The Heidegger-Jaspers Correspondence (1920-1963)*, transl. Gary E. Aylesworth, eds. Walter Biemel and Hans Saner, Amherst, NY: Humanity Books 2003, pp. 160-2, here p. 162.

⁶ Karl Marx, "Critical Notes on the Article 'The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian,'" in *Early Writings*, transl. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, London, UK: Penguin Books 1975, pp. 401-20, here p. 420.

something completely different than what it is in reality.⁹

After this encouragement from Jaspers, Heidegger ends up downplaying in a cowardly and dishonest manner his own political involvement in events. In all this subterfuge, almost as an aside, Heidegger writes in the letter to Jaspers something that strikes hard, disclosing as it conceals:

*Now is our turn. I have no illusion. I know from our son who has returned from Russia that my name even now stands at the front again, and that any day the threat can have its effects. Stalin doesn't need to declare war any longer. Every day he wins a battle, but one doesn't see it. For us, as well, there is no avoiding it, and every word and every piece of writing is in itself a counterattack, if all of this does not play itself out in the political, which itself has long been outplayed by other relations to being and leads a pseudoexistence.*¹⁰

The final sentence here, as parenthetical as it is, sticks out. It is one to be underlined. Just as Jaspers underlined and reacted to it in his response, which he had waited for two years to write. In the letter Jaspers finally sends, he proceeds by quoting Heidegger back at him. Jaspers elaborates:

Can the political, which you take to be outplayed, ever disappear? Has it not only changed its shape and its means? Must we not recognize precisely this?

You write further: "In this homelessness... and advent conceals itself." My horror grew when I read that. As far as I can understand, that is pure dreaming, in the order of many such dreamings that—always at the moment—have made fools of us for the past half-century. [HJC 197]

Jaspers' remark regarding whether the political could ever disappear begs the question whether there is something that guarantees its endurance or perdurability. This perdurability, Jaspers conveys, is not to be understood as a fixed, atemporal condition.

Its manifestations, its forms and appearances, can and have changed. Rather, it is a matter of asking whether there can be change within non-change, a historical variation that nonetheless leaves intact the political as an invariant of human co-existence?

Between Heidegger and Jaspers, there are in play two contrapuntal assertions that can be said to characterize the status and function of the political. Heidegger's words, I submit, should not be reduced simply to the resignatory disavowal of a committed National Socialist who, after resigning from the Rectorship, became disillusioned and withdrew from politics, then remaining silent on the horrors of the holocaust. To be drawn out of his words, I contend, is neither something psychological nor autobiographical, but historical-ontological; namely, either the political is something that can be said to disappear or it abides as a permanent trait or site of human co-existence.

To deepen the understanding of Heidegger's claim, one would need to return to his 1935 lecture, "The Origin of the Work of Art," specifically to the later written Epilogue attached to the lecture, and first published in *Holzwege* in 1950 (the same year as Heidegger's letter to Jaspers). This reference would be needed, so as to establish an analogical bridge between what one can call the riddle of the political's finitude and what Heidegger presents as the riddle of art, via Hegel's judgment surrounding the fate of art during his own times. Heidegger quotes the following often cited passages from Hegel:¹¹

Art no longer counts for us as the highest manner in which truth obtains existence for itself.

One may well hope that art will continue to advance and perfect itself, but its form has ceased to be the highest need of the spirit.

In all these relationships art is and remains for us, on the side of its highest vocation, something past.¹²

Commenting on the pathos of the end of art, Heidegger states two details I consider to be of relevance: First, Hegel's judgment is not an empirical one. That is, Hegel's claim about the end of art cannot

⁹ Karl Jaspers, "Dear Heidegger! Basel, March 9, 1950," in *The Heidegger-Jaspers Correspondence (1920-1963)*, transl. Gary E. Aylesworth, eds. Walter Biemel and Hans Saner, Amherst, NY: Humanity Books 2003, pp. 186-7, here p. 186.

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, "Dear Jaspers! Freiburg i. Br., April 8, 1950," in *The Heidegger-Jaspers Correspondence (1920-1963)*, transl. Gary E. Aylesworth, eds. Walter Biemel and Hans Saner, Amherst, NY: Humanity Books 2003, pp. 188-91, here p. 190. [Henceforth cited as HJC]

¹¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik, Erster Band," in *Sämtliche Werke, Zwölfter Band*, Stuttgart, DE: Fr. Frommanns Verlag 1927, pp. 150 (X1 134), 151 (X1 135), 32 (X1 16).

¹² Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, transl. Albert Hofstadter, New York, NY: Harper & Row 1975, pp. 15-87, here p. 80. [Henceforth cited as OW]

simply be dismissed out of hand by enumerating all the examples of art and art movements that occurred after Hegel's proclamation of the end. Secondly, the claim is rather historical-ontological, pointing to a historical transformation in art's very relation to truth and to being (OW 80). Art, according to Hegel, is no longer the highest, privileged site for how the movement of spirit reveals itself. Which means it is the function of art with respect to spirit that has changed and that has been annulled, and not the presence of art as such. In Hegel's view, art has undergone a diminution, a weakening, with respect to what it has the capacity to show. Heidegger continues by casting this Hegelian issue in his own understanding of truth as *aletheia*, that is, truth as disclosedness. He thus reposes the question whether art is still an essential and necessary way in which that truth is relevant and decisive for historical existence, or whether art no longer has this character (OW 80). Heidegger adds that proper evaluation of Hegel's terse judgment on art is still in abeyance, and for this reason cannot be easily shunned. As I have previously pointed out, this Epilogue coincides with Heidegger's letter to Jaspers from April 1950, in which the issue of the end gravitates toward the political, rather than art. The riddle of art that Heidegger discusses in light of Hegel is now displaced onto the political. The political leads, in Heidegger's judgment at this time, a pseudo-existence; it has run its course, played itself out, and has been outplayed by other relations to being. Which is to say, according to this reading, the political has reached a point of closure in its capacity to disclose possibilities and set them into play. The use of the prefix pseudo- in the pseudo-existence to which it is reduced carries with it an impoverished, obscure, shadow-like reality: a chimera, a practice or site filled with empty gestures and broken promises.

Reiner Schürmann's Hesitations Regarding the Political

It is together with Schürmann that my attention now turns to show that there exists an equivocation with respect to the political in his consequent investigation and systematic inquiry into the possibility of recasting political philosophy—more specifically, the relation between thinking and acting—from the vantage point of Heidegger's destruction of Western metaphysics and his retreatment of the ontological difference between beings and Being. Schürmann is significant here for

several reasons. The first and obvious one is that Schürmann has arguably gone furthest and deepest in reconstructing Heidegger's contribution to what one can grudgingly call practical philosophy. Moreover, his audacity lies in having proceeded to read Heidegger and his possible contribution to thinking practice, backwards or in reverse (OW 80). Indeed, from precisely the period after the *Kehre*, where Heidegger seems to break from anything approximating an ontology that broaches on practice and everydayness (the outlines of which are traced out in *Being and Time*), and instead, in an increasingly esoteric way, narrates the flight of the gods, and seeks refuge in poetic sayings, Schürmann's proposal is first to address Heidegger's later thinking in order to open up the radicality of his political philosophy. Hence, his second move is to trace Heidegger's contribution to a political thinking from his meditations on *Ereignis* (the event of appropriation) and the history of the truth of *Seinsgeschichte* in order to recast the concrete and existential analysis of *Being and Time*. Schürmann's third audacious move is to deduce from this, a philosophical anarchy, which he claims is at the heart of Heidegger's thinking, and which holds open the possibility of extricating humans from a metaphysical understanding of the relation between thought and practice that derives standards for action from first principles so as to openly receive the singular-manifold of whatever comes into presence. There is finally a fourth reason that makes this inquiry into Schürmann's understanding of the political of interest, against the wider background of its possible fate, as well as in light of a certain antinomy I have already noted in Jaspers and Heidegger regarding whether or not the political is marked by its own finitude. Schürmann himself saw a parting of the ways between the thinking of Heidegger and Jaspers, one in which a decision is required as to whom one should follow in terms of method and mode of questioning. This disaccord is pointedly discussed in relation to Arendt's writings, whose own thoughts on the political go beyond the candid remarks expressed in the correspondence between Jaspers and Heidegger. Schürmann lauds Arendt by claiming that she is taking up the call set by Alexis de Tocqueville, to articulate

a new science of politics...for a new world.¹³

¹³ Reiner Schürmann, "On Judging and Its Issue," in *The Public Realm: Essays on Discursive Types in Political Philosophy*, ed. Reiner Schürmann, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 1989, pp. 1-21, here p. 1.

The trouble is that, as Schürmann critically explores in two essays discussing her work, Arendt erred on the wrong side, following in several important respects the teachings of her mentor Jaspers rather than those of Heidegger.¹⁴ She is said to have taken on from Jaspers his weakest impulses, namely an inattentiveness to history and to the conditions situating and regulating the possibilities for thinking and acting, which she understood as two distinct and separate orders (inheriting Jaspers' proclivity for dualism).¹⁵ The *vita activa* as defined in her book *The Human Condition* stands in a heterogeneous relation to the *vita contemplativa* expounded in her unfinished final work, *The Life of the Mind*. On this basis, Schürmann accuses Arendt of a rarefied understanding of political action alongside a life of the mind that is far from a living one (TM 118-20). He writes pointedly in his review article on Arendt's *Life of the Mind*, that under the semblance of historicity, both her understanding of the faculties of the mind and her understanding of politics are rendered a-historical and a-temporal:

As a philosopher, she can account for the temporalization of the life of the mind, but not its historicization. As a political scientist, she accounts for the latter, but in a way that only superficially agrees with the former. [TM 122-3]

The interesting point here is that, despite all the signs pointing otherwise, arguably, on the question of the political, Schürmann finds himself vacillating between Jaspers and Heidegger. Despite his historicization of thinking and acting, at times Schürmann comes close to leaving the category of the political under-historicized. It is this that leaves him hesitating about Heidegger's radical claim surrounding its possible finitude.

I shall now explore this issue more closely. How does Schürmann handle the political? Does he assume in the manner of Jaspers its ontological perdurability (that while changing its contents, strategies, regimes, nonetheless broaches an invariant feature of social

life)? Which is to say, does it border on something transcendental in the necessary way in which social life is organized? Or does Schürmann open up the possibility for a thinking of the political that accounts for its finitude, its possible "in-operativity" and closure? Schürmann's ambivalence or, perhaps better put, an undecidability and hesitation, can be articulated thus: in the very attempt to reconstruct something akin to a new way of thinking the political, which he meticulously develops from Heidegger, he leaves a paper trail as to how a fundamental questioning of the function and necessity of the political might lead to an acknowledgement of the contingency of its appearing, and a loosening of its grip. Schürmann retains an assumption about the allure of the political at the same time as he offers his readers more than glimpses that this long-held assumption is to be cast in doubt.

Schürmann's First Hesitation: The Status of the Political

What status does the political have in Schürmann's writings? Despite the clarity Schürmann seemingly offers on the matter, there are hesitations. The political (and Schürmann consistently speaks in the French original of *le politique* rather than *la politique*) assumes a privileged or overdetermining function in the epochal history that he adapts, with some modifications, from Heidegger's *Seinsgeschichte*. Briefly put, the history that Schürmann narrates is the history of successive yet discontinuous principal economies. A principal economy or epoch is that which holds sway for a time over the being of appearing. It provides the conditions under which things appear to us, legislated through common nouns and distributed as what is held in common. It is constituted and consolidates itself as a constellation of actions, things, and sayings by virtue of a prevailing principle that acts as a standard, a measure, by which all is submitted for veridicality. In an especially clear passage in Section 5 of *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, Schürmann draws out the phenomenological implications of this. First, he claims that this regulating and constituting principle can be read off symbolically from "any domain whatsoever,"¹⁶ and lists the following

¹⁴ Reiner Schürmann, "The Time of the Mind and the History of Freedom," in *Modern Philosophies of the Will*, eds. Kieran Aarons and Francesco Guerico, Zurich, CH: Diaphanes 2022, pp. 117-124, here pp. 118-9. [Henceforth cited as TM]

¹⁵ Reiner Schürmann, "Du luxe d'exister: Karl Jaspers et le sacré," *Cahiers internationaux de symbolisme: Les avatars contemporains du sacré* 27-28, Mons, FR: Le Ciephum 1975, pp.103-120, here p. 107.

¹⁶ Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*, transl. Christine-Marie Gros and Reiner Schürmann, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1987, p. 35. [Henceforth cited as HB]

disparate example from the Inca empire:

Inca urbanism, the tattoos, the hats, the aide memoires made of small cords called *quipu* – each speaks in its own way of the referent that gives coherence to that culture. [HB 35]

All these paraphernalia are split regarding the mere facts that they are and are simultaneously a referent that encompasses them all, giving coherence, intelligibility to how they appear and operate within a regime of being-there. The issue is that no everyday artefact, thing, place, or practice, reveals by itself with striking intensity the being it is. In their heterogeneity, there is a difference in degree with respect to their disclosive capacity surrounding the truth in which they all participate, as they gain their sense and meaning from a referent that is not found in any one of them alone. This variation in revelatory capacity of things, relations, and appearances, begs the question of what accounts for the revealing of what is revealed. Or, as Schürmann puts it:

where is such an order to be read most plainly? [HB 35]

To this question, the political is introduced as

that *dominium* which most clearly marks an epochal principle's scope of rule. [HB 36]

He explains:

It would have to be in a domain where multiple conducts come together; where things, actions, and words join to become accessible to all; at the strategic intersection of thought and practice; where the collectivity is witness to dealings and proceedings while also being their protagonist: in what is at the same time both communal and noticeable, that is, public. [HB 35-6]

The political is what gathers, it is the point of condensation, of ordering and schematizing; it orders what is heterogeneous into One. Borrowing a term that Heidegger uses, Schürmann refers to the German word, *Ort*, in the sense of the iron tip of a lance where all things are joined. In all this, the political is accorded clarity, legibility, and visibility. It has the capacity to disclose, accounting for the shine that things, deeds, and speech take on and emanate in their internal relations – an un-concealing that, of course, contains within it, as its obverse, a concealing. Schürmann writes, propositionally,

the site that manifests an epochal order is the political. Nowhere else does what a given community holds

highest appear as clearly. Nowhere else does the manner in which it orders all things toward this first, *pros hen*...become accessible in its scope. [HB 40]

The political is without comparison. Here, the position and function of the political *vis-à-vis* epochal history as principal economies is *prima facie* clear and is emphatically asserted by Schürmann. The political constitutes and consolidates an order in which things, words, and action come to reveal themselves in a particular light, and out of which a determinate sense, a certain being-there, is accorded to them. On this basis, the political has three functions: transcendental, alethiological, and poietic. It is transcendental because it is the condition of possibility for something like an epoch to constitute itself as such, it serves as a unitary trait in a field of heterogeneous phenomena. It is alethiological, because it is what situates the truth of being for a particular time and space through its capacity to disclose possibilities. It is poietic in its original meaning, because it is productive, both as a bringing-forth and as bringing into the open, as well as signifying an accomplishment. What it accomplishes – albeit for a limited time – is a constancy in what appears as what is present, namely, a regulation in meaning, sense, in possibilities with respect to thinking and doing. The conditional clause "for a time" is significant. For the ground of necessity that the political is charged with founding is itself founded on the *Abgrund* of groundless contingency. Only by decree, by *fiat*, by *nomothetic* positing, does a principal economy or epoch institute itself. One implication is that the political surmounts its own conditions. As abysmal, the political arises from the groundless ground – as a Phoenix rises from the ashes (a metaphor Michael Marder has recently noted) – and legislates over phenomena by an act of self-legislation.¹⁷ The political, to quote Schürmann, commandeers "a finite *a priori*" (HB 81).

There is something curious in this reasoning. Schürmann reminds the readers (and I shall address its significance anon) that historical epochs are marked by their own transitivity; they are fragile, destined to disappear just as once they had appeared. Epochs are themselves finite orders. But what about the political?

¹⁷ Michael Marder, "A Phoenix's Tale," in *Breaking Grounds: Thinking with Reiner Schürmann*, eds. Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback and David Payne, Zurich, CH: Diaphanes 2025, pp. 329-38, here p. 330.

When the central site can no longer hold, and the sense holding things together loosens and falls away, a transition into a new constellation begins. Despite this loosening up, the transcendental-alethiological-poietic function of the political abides in this very falling away. Here, one can add that if the political is the site for the constitution of finite *a priori* epochal principles, for a large period of Western thought and practice, the realm of the political seems untouched in its role as purveyor of historically decreed principles, its ontological function appears auto-immunized. Which is to say, only its ontic valences change, not its ontological function. Schürmann narrates thus with reference to the transition from Greek to Roman antiquity as follows:

In the Greek *polis*, such emergence means that one has freed oneself from domestic labor and from its ties based on necessity in order to rally men of equal condition, free men, and accomplish noble deeds, thereby attaining excellence. In Roman society, this emergence into the public occurs through taking power rather than through taking the *rostrum*. [HB 37]

The shift between epochal orders marks a change in how the political makes manifest; its valences change. And yet there remains a continuity in function, inasmuch that the political is what does the manifesting. The genealogy that Schürmann initiates here with respect to the examples from antiquity could be extended to encompass the entire historical sweep of epochs, up to the present. Schürmann seems to end up showing, with the use of Heidegger, Jaspers' counter-assertion (against Heidegger) that the political cannot have played itself out because it is that which puts constellations of things-actions-speech into play; it borders on a site or form that is permanent with respect to its formal function while subject to mutations, shifts, developments, and regressions with respect to its appearances. The political would thus evade finitude.

And yet, anyone acquainted with Schürmann knows that the field of problems within which the political is situated go deeper than this. Firstly, because—and this is the substantive inquiry that Schürmann embarks upon—the question animating his work is the following: what happens when epochal history (as described above) comes to an end, when the *pros hen* relation, the preponderance of the One, of indubitable ground, of unitary trait and foundation, is eviscerated? What is routinely described as the

end or closure of metaphysics brings the political to an end as institutionalization of an order that is centripetally organized around the One (with respect to a privileged principial referent or *topos*). The *pros hen* relation, which is certified through epochal history, comes to an end, and the political, which served as *dominium*, is pulverized. The site becomes monstrous, which is to say, manifold. The question to be considered here is as follows: is the political itself (in terms of its functions, its assumed obviousness) the practical effect of metaphysics? Are the orders of the political and the metaphysical co-originary? And if this is the case, then with the closure of metaphysics, must humans encounter at the same time the closure, the end, of the political? At this point, the historicization of the political gives rise precisely to a profound hesitation in Schürmann's work. On the one hand, the political, in the epochal history that he presents, borders on an atemporal condition of history; it is that condition that makes history legible. On the other hand, it is historicity as such that is responsible for a mutation in the political conditions, and, at the end of epochal history, historicity runs ahead of the political, overtaking it by putting into question, placing under suspension, the political domain's former preeminence. Perhaps. There are further indicative features of a hesitation that I will now address.

Schürmann's Second Hesitation: The (In-)Operativity of the Political

It is often the case with Schürmann that certain things reveal themselves para-textually—which is to say in marginal notes and footnotes. In such places, the reader faces counter-movements, counter-pulls, slight reversals, and displacements that are hidden from direct view. Next, just for the sake of illustration, I will pick up two notes that open up a space of hesitation and possibility. The first appears in note six of the English translation, which accompanies his claim:

The arena where an epochal constellation most obviously displays its principle is the political. [HB 36]

This obvious display, however, is supplemented by the following qualification:

To say that the political is the domain where an epochal principle is most apparent is not to claim that all other phenomena can only be explained politically, nor that phenomenology...ceases to be regional. The

political is only that region...of phenomena whose essential trait is to join publicly the theoretical and practical. [HB 317]

In the context of what has already been discussed, this is a significant qualification. After having stated the privileged site of the political as dominium over all domains, Schürmann expresses (i) a resistance to any political unilateralism, namely that the sense of all things would be reducible to a political determination and (ii) adds that the political is a central site, only insofar that it serves as the joining in public, of the orders of the theoretical and the practical. Yet this centrality is weighed down by the problematic that Schürmann himself invests in, namely that the bridge, linkage, between the orders of thinking and acting is precisely sundered, thrown out of gear, according to which the derivation of action from ruling principles, that is, from theory (and which the political seemingly inculcates), is marked by in-operativity. I will have reason to return to this specific act of pulling back, of restraint, in Schürmann's paratextual reasoning a bit later.

A further instance of equivocation occurs after Schürmann has employed Heidegger's essay on the "Origin of the Work of Art" to discuss the problem of the will. In a footnote, he quotes from Heidegger's post-scriptum to the aforementioned essay. He writes:

Heidegger can therefore ask: "Is art still, or is it no longer, an essential and necessary way in which that truth happens which is decisive for our historical being-there?" [HB 377n47]

Schürmann continues:

Perhaps art no longer functions as a decisive variable or "track" for our existence. Religion too, after having served as the conveyer of the essential injunctions throughout the ages, now has forfeited that role. [HB 377n47]

Schürmann hesitantly remarks that perhaps the function of art and religion is placed under suspension. Yet, one might wonder what stops Schürmann from going further in this context? What prevents the political from possibly succumbing to the same fate, at least in terms of the transcendental, alethiological, and poietic functions it has had up to the present time? Schürmann leaves the readers pondering this question at the same time as he pulls the ground from underneath the locus of the political.

Schürmann's Third Hesitation: The Derivation of the Political

In an essay from 1978, a few years before the publication of his book on Heidegger, Schürmann assents to the idea that the "realm of politics is a derivative realm."¹⁸ Derivative of what? Obviously, for Schürmann, the answer is not the standard one that political philosophy (from Plato and Aristotle to Kant, up to the work of Jürgen Habermas) provides, namely that of nomothetic principles derived from some other region of knowledge (whether physics or anthropology, metaphysics or biology), and certified by the philosopher as being the civil servant of humanity.¹⁹ Political action is not to be derived from theory, in whatever gloss or form it may take. Dispensing with this classical understanding of the derivation of the political, nonetheless, opens up other possibilities for conceiving its derivative status. This essay has already indicated how the political finds its conditions of intelligibility out of the epochal history that Schürmann describes. Wither epochs, then wither the political? This is the decisive question in this context. When, with the closure of metaphysics, Schürmann points toward a new possibility for thinking action—one that affords the possibility of being emancipated from the grip of the *archai* of universalizing and objectivating principles and maximizing referents, and is released into the anarchic field of being as presencing—practice becomes polymorphous and decisively strewn (HB 48). This new mode of acting is said to be attuned not to historically situated regimes of truth that regulate phenomena as to what is present, but to what is received from the free accord of the presencing of phenomena, in their manifold inconsistency and anarchic fluctuations. At the closure of epochal history, what opens up is the possibility of living a life without why. The unitary site, once referred to as the political, becomes a monstrous site of manifold openings and plural beginnings. This new attunement means opening up to the "event of presencing" that "founds nothing" (HB 81); an opening that cannot take place unless the very search for a foundation is renounced.

¹⁸ Reiner Schürmann, "Political Thinking in Heidegger," *Social Research* 45/1 (Spring 1978), 191-221, here p.199.

¹⁹ Reiner Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, transl. Reginald Lilly, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press 2003, pp. 117, 545.

Does this very relinquishing of foundation put an end to the need for the political? Might it instead open toward a thinking of politics (*la politique*) that does not imply a political thinking (that is, a thinking under the permanent condition of *le politique*, the political). Again, hesitations abound.

On the question of the difference between politics and political, Schürmann moves hesitantly. He provides a historical inventory of cases in politics (*la politique*) that evade being captured by the political (*le politique*), and interrupt the principal economies that the political serves as a public site of gathering. The examples he uses are generally well-known:

the citizens' unions in North America around 1776, the "popular societies" in Paris between 1789 and 1793, the Commune of 1871, the soviets of 1905 and 1917, the Democracy of Councils in Germany in 1918. [HB 91]

Significant about these otherwise heterogeneous cases is that they all stand as singular instances of politics that mark the end of a particular epoch; they irrupt at the point of the fragmentation and deracination of a grounded and founded order, when the authority (predicated on ground-providing and normative-positing) begins to loosen and transition from one principal economy to another begins. Referring to Hannah Arendt, they are said by Schürmann as

modern efforts to free the public domain from coercive force. [HB 91]

However, these modern efforts, as emancipatory and illustrative as they are, do not so easily correlate to the historical conditions that Schürmann would label (following Jean-François Lyotard, though doubtless in a different sense) as defining the "postmodern condition" (HB 45), which comes at the closure of epochal history. The conditions for action and thinking have changed. Schürmann finds that today, there is a palpable and generalized sense of neither living under the assumption nor under the guide that humans are transitioning from or toward anything. He contends that his times are transitioning without a destination. And in this condition of disorientation, it is not so much a sense of wandering joy that strikes. Instead, one is struck by resentment, cynicism, and lethargy—with all the reassertion of authoritarian and opportunistic dangers this is visibly giving sustenance to. Epochal history has come to an end, hegemonic orders (politically overdetermined) have been fundamentally fractured, broken, and thrown

out of gear. This is all part of Schürmann's diagnosis of his own present, and the long, drawn-out, and fundamental turning in Western understanding of thinking, acting, and being. His diagnosis remains relevant to current times (though in ways most definitely Schürmann may not have anticipated). Thus, the multiple cases of modern emancipatory politics to which Schürmann refers are not so easily reclaimable as serving as historical exemplars that might be used to guide action today. Indeed, what one perhaps needs to be mindful of is the possibility that present times mark the political as a pulverized and monstrous site without the security that any politics of emancipation might flourish therein—given that the examples of politics (in the plural singular) inventoried by Schürmann not only operated within the interstices of orders whose authority and nomothetic grip were loosening, but sought direction and found emancipatory orders of belonging (whether this be the aforementioned citizen unions, popular societies, and so on so forth). I say this, with regret, in the ever-growing obscurity that political practice has for many people today.

Schürmann arguably ends up in a curious position. As contrary to his aims this might be, his deconstruction of the political results in freeing practice from the tutelary form of the political. Living a life without why, receiving what presences itself in its singular-plurality, cannot leave any why, explanatory ground, cause, or generalizing descriptive term unexamined, including the political condition of practice. This means questioning the why of political practice, which, perhaps, may render redundant any appellative reference to the political as a qualifying mark.

In a relatively early essay, Schürmann writes instructively

that if theories of collective functioning and organization are alone be called political philosophy then it is better to abandon the title for the practical consequences of the thought of the symbolic difference.²⁰

This remark, which concludes his 1979 essay on "The Ontological Difference and Political Difference," points to something. First, it points to the problem of philosophy as such—that is, whether another thinking

²⁰ Reiner Schürmann, "The Ontological Difference and Political Difference," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 40/1 (September 1979), 99-122, here p. 122.

is required to emancipate ourselves from the nomothetic grip of ultimate principles. But equally, it points to at least the further question whether the political of political philosophy is itself adequate for thinking the practical implications that subtend his thought. This points to three issues with which I shall conclude. One of these issues was taken up by an early critic, Bernard Dauenhauer, who criticizes Schürmann for leaving politics undetermined, and thereby subsumptive in its generality. He writes that it is incumbent upon Schürmann's symbolic difference that

it must satisfactorily distinguish political action from other sorts of action, e.g., artistic action or religious action. And it must make possible the identification of the several actual and possible actions which belong to the political realm. Whatever this second term refers to is the ontic *arché* and *telos* of all political action.²¹

This is precisely what Schürmann cannot countenance, and for good reason. The adjectival marking of cultural practice, religious practice, and political practice would precisely objectify and reify, as well as compartmentalize and particularize practices as entities within a totalizing discourse that speaks to the *Trieb*, the drive, of philosophical mastery. It would precisely miss the possibility of freeing action from propositional and conceptual—that is, theoretical—thinking. But this principled resistance solves little. Instead, it leaves Schürmann with a dilemma. If he accords to all practice a political dimension, then he leaves the political as an unquestioned determination and destination of practice as such. Everything becomes political. If, on the other hand, he subtracts practice from the political, he risks a political quietism that holds too much and too close to Heidegger's line. Either way, he may end up attesting to the withering of the political. In the latter case, because (just like the later Heidegger) there is an active taking flight from it—substituted no doubt for a practice of letting things be. Indeed, this interpretation would come close to the criticism Catherine Malabou has leveled at Schürmann, namely, that his philosophical anarchy closes all exit points to a political anarchism.²²

According to her, the problem is that, for Schürmann, political anarchism, just as with all other modes of practical politics, is condemned to repeat, which

turns out to be nothing but an exotic version of the same world and same legitimacy. [ST 60]

In his tragic sobriety, Schürmann is thus condemned to political silence.

On the second horn of Schürmann's dilemma, there is a contrary problem. Against his own intentions, he ends up maximizing a particular phenomenon or region of phenomena (the transmutation of politics into the political), such that political practice becomes unilaterally changed into the general name for being and for all practice. In subsuming everything under the pull of the political, with respect to the meaning, value, and the visibility of phenomena, practice eclipses itself under the empty assignation of the political.

In a sense, this is exactly where things stand at present: still today people live under the banner that everything is political, they look at (and engage in) political manifestations and protests (which due to all manner of injustices around the world) are in large supply; due to an increasingly mediatized landscape, doing politics today seems to cost less in terms of effort, time, and presence. And yet: the more that everything is declared political, the stronger the sense that nothing is; in the manifestations interested parties bear witness to, and engage in, there is the sense that what is being manifested is the non-manifestation of manifestation as such, a protesting (which, from the Latin, means "bringing forth" into the public) that brings forth in a public space that is ever more fragmented, diminished, sequestered by the logics of capital. Here, the problem has long been so, namely that the act of protesting, of manifesting, has been domesticated as a formal justification for democratic regimes as such; which is to say, governments close their ears and eyes to what specific demands and grievances are manifested therein, and yet make the appeal to the very presence of protest as a formal indication that democracy is working. In the doing of politics, there is an inherent doubt that little is being done. The hallowed political ideas (justice, freedom, equality), which may adorn every political oration, all kinds of political placards held aloft in the street, used to justify all manner of contradictory actions and policies, are weighed down by their own

²¹ Bernard P. Dauenhauer, "Does Anarchy make Political Sense? A Response to Schürmann," *Human Studies* 1/4 (October 1978), 369-375, here p. 372.

²² Catherine Malabou, *Stop Thief! Anarchism and Philosophy*, transl. Carolyn Shread, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press 2023, p. 23. [Henceforth cited as ST]

fungibility. These are some of the traits of current times (which are by no means unambiguous). The political appears, on the one hand, imperious and omnipresent, a label that is routinely stamped on disparate phenomena; on the other hand, in its conspicuous presence there clings the ever-lengthening shadow of its own eclipse.

The exegetical point I have tried to show in this essay is a simple one: in the attempt to draw out the political implications of Heidegger's later thought,

Schürmann may end up confirming the disquieting claim that, as both a privileged site and as a mode of practice, the political has reached a point of saturation and occlusion. But, then again, equally, he might be interpreted as following Jaspers (and against Heidegger) in taking as given the givenness of the political. Perhaps, however—and this would be the disquieting thought many would wish to shun—the political is in fact the last shibboleth of Western thought to fall: the political fated by its own finitude.