Of late, Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* has capitalized on a certain timeliness. A number of critics have remarked on the way that this tale of terror not only resonates with the present historical period—the so-called War on Terror—but also reveals its truth. In this line, Tom Reiss, writing in the September 11, 2005, edition of the *New York Times*, asks which work by Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* or *Under Western Eyes*, is the “true classic” of terrorist literature. According to Reiss, the value of these novels is in their ability to explain “why real people throw away promising careers and families to become terrorists.” Although Reiss mentions the history of “the troubled zone that divides West from East,” the pressing task remains entering into the terrorist’s “psychic world” in order to map “the terrorist mind.”¹ In weighing these two novels against each other, Reiss relies on a psychologizing paradigm of interpretation that reduces the subject of political terror to a matter of the individual psyche. Joseph Conrad’s novels transform into a vast diagnostic tool, classifying individuals according to their normality or abnormality, in the process becoming void of political and historical content.

The diagnostic approach is not, however, limited to a narrow psychological focus. There is a long tradition of criticism staging *The Secret Agent* as a drama pitting the forces of social order against the forces of social anomie. More specifically, several critics interpret the text as an attempt to resolve the crises confronting liberalism and capitalism during the fin de siècle. Eloise Knapp Hay argues that the *The Secret Agent* polemizes against the revolutionary desires of the novel’s anarchists. In Hay’s reading, Conrad represents a tradition of social conservatism in which the organic foundations of society are threatened by anarchist malcontents, *or hommes de ressentiment*. Avrom Fleishman, on the other hand, portrays Conrad as an organically minded social conservative but suggests that instead of depicting a struggle between extrinsic forces (society
and anarchism), the novel stages a contradiction internal to liberal society. The social forms that organize liberal society—especially individualism, national citizenship, and private property—also threaten to tear it apart by fragmenting society into a chaotic tangle of atoms.²

Indeed, one of the most persistent perspectives from which to view The Secret Agent is what Alex Houen has aptly termed “entropolitics,” that is, the political implications of social/physical chaos.³ Houen remarks on the pervasive sense of entropic social decay in the novel, a sense that the world of late Victorian London risks dissipating into a flow of unorganized energy. This disorganization translates to social disorder within the novel, making politics into so many attempts to plug up holes in society proper. Yet for Houen, entropolitics is not merely a matter of conservation but is also the invention of a new political field. The political becomes a corporeal fabric of organization and disorganization comprehending the architectural mass of London, the bureaucratic networks and social institutions of the nation-state, the revolutionary underground, and the news media.⁴ However, Houen’s concern for the blurring of the line between order and disorder, for the indiscernibility of state power and anarchism, risks neutralizing the antagonistic political gesture that constitutes one of the most interesting aspects of the novel. Carey James Mickalites’s “The Abject Textuality of The Secret Agent” acts as a notable corrective to such a tendency in Conrad criticism. Mickalites argues that “Conrad employs figures of the abject to reveal that anxiety-ridden, ‘perverse’ desire defines the public unconscious of Victorian social order, and that this return of the repressed constitutes the novel’s modernist effort to push literary signification beyond the bourgeois limits of the Victorian symbolic order.”⁵ Mickalites demonstrates the existence of a corporeal element in Conrad’s novel irreducible to bourgeois Oedipal forms of social and political organization. There is an abject material underside of the novel in excess of any attempt to identify Conrad’s text with a conservative or reactionary intention. If the narrator of the novel sets up a conflict between the symbolic order and corporeal experience, the former never wholly captures the latter, a subversive corporeality persisting as surplus.⁶

However, what still fails to appear in the above interpretations is the positive articulation of a radically other social order in contrast to the mere negation of the existing order. It is the contention of this essay that Conrad’s novel imagines forms of social life irreducible to entropic dissipation. The novel’s general thrust is less nostalgia for order than a revolutionary desire to overcome the social ills that it diagnoses by producing the
potential for another world. Indeed, this may be the best way to understand what Conrad means in the 1920 note appended to *The Secret Agent* when he admits that

> I have no doubt, however, that there had been moments during the writing of the book when I was an extreme revolutionist, I won’t say more convinced than they [anarchists] but certainly cherishing a more concentrated purpose than any of them had ever done in the whole course of his life. I don’t say this to boast. I was simply attending to my business.

One task of this essay is to respond to the question of how the business of writing enacts a becoming revolutionary. While this passage might be read as indicating an ironic and satirical stance taken against political radicalism—Conrad being, in this light, an archconservative whose modernism is a mode of containing, if not obliterating, political resistance—I read these lines as a more serious engagement with political radicalism: Conrad competes with political anarchists for the title of revolutionary. This passage suggests that there is something in the very act of writing, in the “concentrated purpose” it entails, that opens onto the horizon of revolution.

Critics tend to oscillate between understanding Conrad’s writing (specifically *The Secret Agent*) as a politically committed investigation and diagnosis of social content and viewing it as a self-reflexive modernist exploration of aesthetic form. One solution to this impasse is to treat the novel dialectically, viewing Conrad’s modernism as an ironic formal strategy that at once engages with and estranges itself from political content. The novel becomes a machine negating every possible political position, every possible social engagement, in order to indict the totality of the political and social. Yet Conrad’s becoming revolutionary is imperceptible if one confines oneself to either a strict dichotomy between form and content or its dialectical reconciliation. *The Secret Agent* can be understood more productively from an ontological perspective in which what is at stake is the convergence of representation, the political, and being as such. This, indeed, is the task that Conrad sets for himself when he voices a desire to make the novel “credible” in relation “not so much as to her [Winnie Verloc’s] soul but as to her surroundings, not so much as to her psychology but as to her humanity” (SA, 41). If this line explicitly intends an explanation of Winnie Verloc, it nonetheless gestures more significantly toward
a perspective highlighting the social and political construction of human life. This perspective loses neither the concern for political/social content nor the concern for aesthetic form. Instead, this perspective translates these concerns into a dialectic whereby what is suggested is a contradiction between form and content, a dialectic that is, however, less a matter of the inadequacy of form to content, or vice versa, than of their productive confusion.

If at the level of content what appears most obvious is a political struggle between liberalism and anarchism, at the level of form this struggle mutates, becoming an excuse to rearticulate the very concept of the political. The novel deconstructs the premises of a liberal conception of politics—a conception founding itself upon a division between private and public spheres, national boundaries, and national citizenship—and produces an emerging biopolitics. This emerging biopolitics occurs at the level of what I term—drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, among others—the form of content. The term “form of content” indicates formal organizations outside of the purview of a unified authorial intention or of the totality of the artistic work and consists of linguistic dynamics in excess of the logic of representation or of a strict connection between signifiers and signifieds. More specifically, in the case of The Secret Agent, “form of content” refers to linguistic articulation of corporeality in excess of the narrator’s ironic treatment of the characters. There is, in other words, a politics of corporeality irreducible either to formal irony or to the content of the plot. This excessive corporeal-linguistic material is the object of a biopolitical investigation of The Secret Agent.

My thesis is that this emerging biopolitics is fundamentally ambivalent. On the one hand, it names a series of new controls that capture and manufacture life, at the most minute level, for the constitution of capital and the state. On the other hand, the very same field that poses new forms of oppression also poses new potentials for life that exceed both capital and the state. If other readings have concerned themselves with the timeliness or contemporaneity of The Secret Agent, I would like to demonstrate a certain untimeliness belonging to it, an aspect going against the grain of history and suggesting the potential for another society. Not only does the novel trace the contours of emerging forms of biopolitical control, it also generates an image of life in excess of such control. It even shares in this utopian form of life insofar as it draws upon the energies or potentials that are the real conditions of that future life. Strangely, then, what may seem one of the grimmest of Conrad’s works is also one of the most hopeful.
The Line of Crisis, or the Birth of Biopolitics

There are a number of ways that *The Secret Agent* is a novel of crisis. One, of course, is the ostensible content of the novel, the threat of anarchism to liberalism. In this approach, which situates itself largely in relation to the dynamics of plot, the novel is a struggle to register, negotiate, and resolve social and political chaos. If there is no single protagonist from this perspective, there is nonetheless the position of a protagonist as the representative of law and order held over and against the antagonistic position of the anarchist. This position is a collective one, and the novel becomes a crisis precisely to the extent that the position remains inadequately occupied. But, in an focusing on aesthetic form, the picture looks quite different. In such a focus there are not only potential disruptions to liberal or bourgeois forms of subjectivity, narration, and imagery but also a number of emerging forms. In both cases, the instance of crisis converges upon a displacement, a disruption, and finally a supercession of spatial and temporal linearity. The text deconstructs the line of territory (the boundary of the nation-state) and the line of time (the clock) and, in the process, creates a new political geometry, one that receives its most impressive image in Stevie’s “mad art attempting the inconceivable,” with its “tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines” (*SA*, 76). Before elaborating this new political geometry—the emerging biopolitical regime—it is necessary to briefly work through the novel’s content so as to grasp the implications of its form.

Vladimir, the first secretary of an unnamed embassy, poses to Verloc, the novel’s most obvious choice for the titular “secret agent,” the task of provoking a reactionary crackdown against the dissenting elements of society in London. Vladimir describes Great Britain as “absurd with its sentimental regard for individual liberty,” a nation that sacrifices order for the sake of idealistic principles, endangering not only itself but also the entire international community. With the British government, says Vladimir, “there is no end to prevention,” because they “dislike finality” (*SA*, 61). Because of its privileging of individuals in the form of citizenship, its concern for abstract civil rights, Great Britain cannot set permanent boundaries or lines but is instead caught in a situation of continuous revision. British sovereignty operates only on a case-by-case basis in a legal mode confined to reacting to—rather than taking a proactive stance against—threats. This turns the nation into a breeding ground for political criminals, for individuals who would not merely challenge this or that particular law but would overturn the law itself. Great Britain, Vladimir enjoins, “must be brought into line” (*SA*, 64; emphasis added). It must be
made to recognize the threats that exist under its very nose and forced to act against them in line with the whole of Europe. But, more importantly, it must be reconceived along the proper line of a more effective regime of discipline and control.\textsuperscript{11}

The breakdown of order implied by Vladimir’s linear injunction plays itself out at the level of content in the ambiguity of characters’ national backgrounds. Vladimir possesses a Slavic name and a mode of speech whose guttural intonations would mark him as a stereotypically Russian character within the context of Conrad’s often Slavophobic oeuvre, but he also speaks English with a remarkably British accent. In one reading, Conrad’s novels perform the work of an allegory of national politics. The genealogies ascribed to characters produce containers—albeit rather porous ones—for traits that make individual characters represent national tendencies. This labeling provides material for an allegory defining not merely a particular national character but a global character as well or, at least, the character of the West in relation to its colonies and the New World.\textsuperscript{12} *The Secret Agent*, however, withholds Vladimir’s national origins even at its most explicitly national moments, such as when the narrator chimes in: “Descended from generations victimized by instruments of arbitrary power, he was racially, nationally, and individually afraid of the police” (*SA*, 206). The narration splits Vladimir’s fear among the agencies of race, nation, and selfhood, placing none of the qualifications above the others. The inclusion of selfhood as a determining factor on par with nation and race suggests a strange unrootedness, a sense that Vladimir lacks the indexical quality that would make him a geopolitical signifier. This unrootedness asserts itself as an overloaded cosmopolitanism: Vladimir, a member of the exclusive Explorer’s Club, moves about in the upper echelons of British society, and yet he always reports to and from a vague elsewhere. One cannot even say that he is divided, for without the mark of a particular nation-state, one lacks the knowledge of where to draw the line of division. But neither can one say that he belongs to any place, for he obviously floats at a distance from particular places. He hovers between the borders of the nation-state, an agent of disarticulation and a sign of crisis.

This sense of nonbelonging is a quality of most of the novel’s characters. Verloc, for instance, has legal citizenship not only in Great Britain but in France as well. Verloc’s associates, such as Karl Yundt, possess names that seem to lack a certain English quality, but they are never affiliated with any specific nation. Part of their nonaffiliation may have to do with their associations with socialism and anarchism, political formations that tend to favor internationalist or antistate identifications, but such affiliations still fail to fully account for the positive force of this ambiguity.
This breakdown of national content may be taken as the first instance of the crisis with which we are concerned. The murkiness of the characters’ backgrounds disorders the raw material of the novel, demanding a response beyond the typical efforts of the novel’s realist genre. This response is found in the modernist affects and imagery of the text, in the arena of what I have called the form of content, where there emerges the interference between the linguistic and the corporeal. This new form of content is beyond the national line; it is an emergent globalization that while not abandoning the nation-state to the ashcan of history nevertheless displaces it, reconceiving it in a new form.

The novel engenders this new form of content through several exceptional characters or, more accurately, through the characters insofar as they become exceptions to the liberal order. This emerging form expresses itself strongly in the Assistant Commissioner (AC), whose career in a “tropical colony” consisted of seeking out for elimination the “nefarious secret societies amongst the nations” (SA, 116). It is a job that he prefers to his present location in the bureaucratic machinations of London’s metropolitan government, for it grants him the independence and dominance of a figure such as Kurtz in The Heart of Darkness or Jim in Lord Jim who, existing outside the limits of the homeland or nation-state, are free to act in the spirit of the law (or perhaps “civilization”) rather than by its letter. It is this freedom that the AC seeks in his decision to investigate the bombing case himself instead of relying on his subordinates. In departing his desk and venturing into the labyrinth city, the AC opens the horizon of a new mode of control, one that no longer requires solid territorial boundaries, one based on the bare life of deterritorialized citizens. Indeed, this wandering figure of control signals the transition from what Michel Foucault calls a society of discipline to what Gilles Deleuze calls control society: a shift denoting not a negation of institutions of discipline such as the school and the prison but rather their displacement and mobilization, their transformation into a series of permutative operations that shift functions situationally. Rather than Weber’s suffocating iron cage, this shift represents an elastic web of control.13

The journey of the AC dissociates British nationality from itself, marking the contingency, artificiality, and historicity of any British nationality. Making his mission the expulsion of all foreign influences in London, he disguises himself and floats through the streets. He mimics his former otherness from both the bureaucracy and the natives by taking up an identity that eschews both the simple badge of the police and the easy flow of the man of the crowd. He is a “cool, reflective Don Quixote, with the sunken eyes of a dark enthusiast and a very deliberate manner”
who appears as an “unobtrusive shadow” (SA, 150). The AC is amorphous and unimpressionable. Linked as he is to Don Quixote, he might be dismissed as an idle dreamer, perhaps pursuing the rootedness of the lost bonds of feudal service, and yet here is an individual who is also “cool,” “reflective,” and “deliberate.” His gaze moves between the paperwork of his office and the people on the street as if they were one and the same, all figures in a state-cast program. This coincidence of reason and fantasy prefigures an agency that will be at once in touch and out of touch with present reality, creating the space for a powerful Britain beyond any particular Britishness, for an exercise of power beyond fixed territorial lines. This deterritorialized power emerges most intensely in a “little Italian restaurant” containing an “atmosphere of fraudulent cookery mocking an abject mankind in the most pressing of its miserable necessities” (SA, 151). The contrast between Italian food and British territory gestures to the arbitrariness of the application of nationality to both the food and the territory. Nationality becomes a commodity circulating uncertainly between countries, a logo instead of a relation between people and place, a sign whose substance is all but reducible to its purchasibility—a miserable necessity indeed.

The culinary commodification of nationality may, however, be taken as but a symptom of a larger tendency toward denationalization, a tendency that comes to undo and perhaps even destroy a liberal form of subjectivity. The passage continues:

On going out the Assistant Commissioner made to himself the observation that the patrons of the place had lost in the frequentation of fraudulent cookery all their national and private characteristics. And this was strange, since the Italian restaurant is such a peculiarly British institution. But these people were as denationalized as the dishes set before them with every circumstance of unstamped respectability. Neither was their personality stamped in any way, professionally, socially, or racially. They seemed created for the Italian restaurant, unless the Italian restaurant had been perchance created for them. But that last hypothesis was unthinkable, since one could not place them anywhere outside those special establishments. One never met these enigmatical persons elsewhere. It was impossible to form a precise idea what occupations they followed by day and where they went to bed at night. And he himself had become unplaced. (SA, 152; emphasis added)
This restaurant could be called a machine of denationalization, a machine that produces life as bare necessity. The atmosphere of this peculiar nonplace erases the qualities of the individuals who are its patrons. The common linguistic roots of “patron” and “patriot” both derive from the Latin *pater*, or “father,” and thus it can be said that the clientele sacrifice their nationality to become patriots of the restaurant. The restaurant strips them, attribute by attribute, of anything that might add up to an individual identity, putting in the place of unicity a serial logic in which each is a mere element of the restaurant itself. Such is the implication of the analogy that equates customer and commodity to each other. The customers, too, are no more than the bland, unremarkable dishes, the “miserable necessities” set before them. Everything becomes reduced to a set of indefinite yet quantitative values, masses of food and masses of customers, mirror images that amount to a general negation of quality. We enter into the logic of commodity fetishism, where quantitative relations between things have come to replace qualitative relations between people.

But if the customers are no more than the effect of a negation issuing from the restaurant, we must nonetheless register the particularity of the negation. Conrad delineates quite specifically the qualities that vanish due to the frequentation of this nonplace: they are the key predicates that translate being in general into being a citizen. Profession, social position, and race each transform life into a localized form inscribed within the territory of the nation-state. They come together to form an address through which the individual may be called upon by the state—not only a locality, then, but also a name, citizenship as social relation and identity. What is more, such qualifiers also function, in the traditional realist novel, especially the bildungsroman, as the variables that serve as the motor of the plot. As Franco Moretti has argued, the protagonist of these novels is supposed to make his way in the world, to climb the social ladder, finding his place in history and the social sphere and, in turn, resolving the social contradictions of capitalism that the novel presupposes and with which it engages. The eradication of these characteristics cuts to the core of the genre of the novel, suggesting much about the static quality of *The Secret Agent*, the sense that the novel is missing the events or intrigues that would give it dramatic gravity. It would appear that nothing happens because the typical actors of the novel have been voided, that nothing happens because there is nobody to act. Indeed, this nothingness structures the narrative discourse of the novel insofar as what might be considered the axis around which the novel turns—the attempted bombing of the Greenwich Observatory—is presented only as an absence, that is, only indirectly through secondhand reports.
“Not stamped in any way, professionally, socially, or racially,” the patrons of the restaurant are effectively outside the purview of the nation-state and the normal society it seeks to establish, but they nonetheless persist in, even insist on, their existence. Extending the implications of the metaphor of stamping (the dishes are “unstamped,” and the clientele are not “stamped”), it can be said that the patrons lack notarization by the state, the seal of approval that would make their circulation official. From the perspective of the state and the perspective of the AC, that great hunter of secret organizations, they are a counterfeit form of life, “enigmatical” and “unthinkable” life with no legal right to exist, life confined to all those in-between nonplaces that resist localization. These “people”—who are no nation’s people—are to be found only in “special establishments” such as the Italian restaurant, places that not only lack a national identity but void the national identity with which they come into contact. If we are to make any sense, or even nonsense, of these paradoxes, we must confront the ultimate paradox of the passage, held in abeyance until this moment, that “the Italian restaurant is such a peculiarly British institution.” How could it be that this nonplace, which functions as a de-nationalizing machine, is “peculiarly” British? The passage seems to suggest that what constitutes the essence of Britain is precisely the negation of nationality as such. An admittedly simplistic explanation might suggest that identity, the ego, requires the internalization of an image of the other: for Britain to be Britain and not Italy it must contain within itself the negation of Italy, of other nations in general, and then return to itself via the transcending operation of a Hegelian Aufhebung. This would thicken Edward Said’s injunction to read the canon “contrapuntally” as the “interrpellation of culture by empire,” adding that not only must one mark the traces of colonized territories within the metropole, but one must also note the traces of European nations within each other.

Although such mirror play is certainly present, we must also acknowledge a moment in crossing between the self and its other when the two coincide, when the other of the national, whether it be colonial or European, becomes indistinguishable from the national. The text crystallizes this moment in the figure of the AC, “one more queer foreign fish,” who is struck suddenly by his own appearance: “He had a sense of loneliness, of evil freedom. It was rather pleasant. When, after paying for his short meal, he stood up and waited for his change, he saw himself in the sheet of glass, and was struck by his foreign appearance” (SA, 151). It is all too tempting to imagine that the AC is no more than an aberration of the state, a slight cancerous growth foreign to the routines of the state organism. Indeed, the text even throws up this ruse in the form of Inspector
Heat’s many complaints to the effect that the AC is overstepping the bounds of his position. But turning back to the paradox of the peculiarly British Italian restaurant, what becomes apparent is that the lonely, evil freedom of the AC, his queer and foreign attitude, is in fact a foreignness of the state to itself, a self-otherness of the most immediate kind. To borrow a phrase, the AC embodies the exception that proves the rule. We may now say that the supernumerary/nonall position of anarchy has been displaced by the peculiar nonbeing, the unqualified life, of the patrons of the Italian restaurant. An uncanny geography of “special establishments” comes into view, and we arrive at the topology of sovereignty that Giorgio Agamben describes in his work Homo Sacer.17

In Homo Sacer, Agamben creates a grammar of political life focused upon the paradoxes that found political sovereignty. The principle paradox is that of the sovereign decision, for in order for politics to exist—and Agamben significantly, and problematically, identifies politics tout court with the state in this work—there must be an act that creates the state, an act exceeding any justification (since justification would be the work of an as of yet uncreated law) that generates the authority investing any particular legal action. Following Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt, and Blaise Pascal, Agamben thinks of the authority of the law in terms of the force/violence that invests it and the force/violence that it exerts. The sovereign decision consists of a force that is at once in the name of the law and in excess of the law; it is that moment when an extraordinary force produces a surplus that invests itself in an institutional form (the state) that capitalizes upon it. If the sovereign decision is temporal, on the one hand, defining itself as the beginning, it is, on the other, rendered spatial insofar as it demands repetition in the form of a return. The law, Benjamin argues, degenerates or decays if it does not renew itself through acts of violence that re-member the founding of the state, acts that are not only signs of state authority but also remakings of the state in a new and yet continuous form.18 The life of the state, then, is profoundly cyclical and homogeneous, taking the form of small cycles of law-making and law-preserving violence (the everyday actions of the courts, the police, etc.) and larger cycles of renewal (military actions, capital punishment, etc.). This eternal return of the same is remarkably amenable to a recoding in terms of the spatial and logical figure of the exception: “The exception is what cannot be included in the whole of which it is a member and cannot be a member of the whole in which it is always already included” (HS, 25).

If the definition of the exception appears too abstract to adequately describe the complexities of political life, Agamben nonetheless turns this abstraction into the motor of an intensive and extensive rethinking of the
political: extensive because Agamben’s thought concerns the totality of the political in both historical and geographical terms, and intensive because Agamben, instead of being interested in the pragmatic details of political positions, concerns himself with the very being of politics, its ontological foundation. Sovereignty operates by incorporating life into itself, an incorporation that functions through a fundamental split between zoe, or basic biological life, and bios, or collective/social life. The state takes life into itself through an inclusive exclusion, the exception, whereby the natural life of the human being (zoe) is subordinated to its social life (bios), holding life in general accountable to its conformity to the law. The inclusion of life into sovereignty generates a necessary remainder (bare/mere/naked life) embodied in the figure of homo sacer, a figure homologous to that of the patrons of the Italian restaurant. That is, in order to define the limit of the life proper to the state, there must be an exceptional figure that embodies a position at once inside and outside of the state, a figure marking the boundary, threshold, or line. This is a figure reducible neither to biological life nor social life but instead to the blurry region between them. This in-between space acts as a measuring device for political life in general, enabling the articulation of politics through a form of suspension. Perhaps the most general and prominent form of this suspension is to be found in the idea of human rights, about which Agamben writes that “Rights are attributed to man (or originate in him) solely to the extent that [the bare life of] man is the immediately vanishing ground (who must never come to light as such) of the citizen” (HS, 128). If the human/man is precisely that which exceeds the animal/bare life within him, he is also, however, held hostage to that very same (non)form of life. He is included in the territory of the state only to the extent that he rises above the exception of his bare life, which is to say that he is constantly in danger of lapsing into the bare life that inhabits him and must therefore continuously strive to overcome it or risk incurring the wrath of the state proper to the savage beast, to life deemed without value.

Translating Agamben’s biopolitics into Conrad’s terms, we may say that by stamping the place where the citizen rises above its bare life and emerges into the law, the nation circumscribes this bare life and captures it as an anchor by which power can operate. Each citizen carries the potentiality of a voided body, of delegitimation, within him as an active and necessary condition of belonging to the nation-state. Anyone might become one of the “enigmatical persons” of the Italian restaurant. The Italian restaurant is less a place and more, as the phrase “special establishment” suggests, a floating condition of political life, a contingent and mobile apparatus of control. If this condition is exceptional, it is only so in the sense, as
Agamben would put it, that the exception has become the rule. Indeed, the ambiguity of the national origins of the characters in the novel bears witness to this fact, for another way of saying that the characters lack an articulated national genealogy is to say that they all tend toward the unqualified life of the Italian restaurant, or bare life. The restaurant, then, acts as the zero degree of political life in the novel. It is a kernel of negative identification renewing the power of the state by voiding the particularities of life and producing a blank space upon which the state can inscribe relations that conform to it. We may say that the AC is able to engage in his task of “clearing out of this country all the foreign political spies, police, and that sort of—of—dogs”—that is, the task of creating a proper people, of producing a life wholly inscribed within the state—precisely because of the way he shares in the condition of the restaurant (SA, 208).

“A queer, foreign-looking chap,” the AC is a floating signifier weaving a network of power throughout the novel, connecting the lowest to the highest by constructing a commonality founded upon the expulsion of bare life (“dogs”). In The Secret Agent, life tends toward bare life.

But if Conrad, like Agamben, emphasizes the significance of bare life, he nonetheless makes of it less the essence of the political than one of its components, fields, or attributes. Nor, we shall see, does bare life encompass the entirety of the biopolitical aspect of Conrad’s work. Conrad complicates Agamben’s picture of politics by articulating it along more complex spatial and temporal lines. Agamben’s vision is quite mythic in the sense formulated by Claude Levi-Strauss, which denotes a transhistorical structure whose temporal form is amenable to graphic tabulation, to timeless elements arranged in a mechanical or programmatic form with a specific end. Agamben produces a dystopian fable, a tale tracing the long trajectory of a Fall without an Eden standing behind it. If this Fall explicitly takes a historical form when Agamben speaks of the modern moment when the biopolitical nature of politics “comes into light,” its historicity comes undone by the way in which the event of history is reducible to revelation, however prolonged: history, for Agamben, is no more than an adequation of politics to its own inner essence, that is, no more than the progressive reduction of all forms of life to bare life. What appears to be an epic story culminating in the tragedy of the Holocaust is really no more than the “homogenous, empty time” that Walter Benjamin described as the ticking off of beads of a rosary, a cyclical time whose beginning is only quantitatively, not qualitatively, different from its end. If this catastrophic view of politics as a cycle of cycles (“one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage”) is indeed identical with the political as such, then there would seem to be little to say of any consequence, for
everything would have been always already decided. Agamben imagines an alternative, a moment when life would exhaust bare life by breaking the hold of the exception and opening the horizon of a redeemed life. This alternative, however, is necessarily hazy. If redemption is to remain outside the all-inclusive reach of the exception, it must remain transcendent to the political, since the political has been conceived of solely in terms of the exception. In Agamben’s Homo Sacer, a political event of consequence would be, quite literally, a miracle. But the sovereign exception’s capture of social life is really only one aspect of a more complicated story, at least in Joseph Conrad’s biopolitics.

Unqualified Life: The Ambivalence of the Biopolitical

So far, this essay has concerned itself with the ideological dimensions of the biopolitics of The Secret Agent. It has addressed the way that life becomes the life of the state or the way in which bodies are produced for/as capital without, however, suggesting the fundamental ambivalence at the core of this elaboration. Following the work of Fredric Jameson, it would be better to conceive of a dialectic between ideology and utopia according to which the complex production of bodies in the text, even when this production appears to subsume life under capital and the state, projects a horizon of potentiality extending beyond the present actualizations of history. In other words, the same potentiality actualized in the name of the liberal welfare state may also become actualized in other forms; it is a matter of shifting valences. Indeed, such a gesture is essential to Fredric Jameson’s understanding of modernism, as evident in his engagement with Conrad in the chapter “Romance and Reification: Plot Construction and Ideological Closure in Joseph Conrad” in The Political Unconscious. Despite the subtitle of this essay, Jameson interests himself as much in the openings produced by the rationalization, fragmentation, and reification of modern capitalism, processes that express themselves in the formal strategies of modernism as intensifications of sensory experience and as the utopian generation of strange new worlds.

Jameson demonstrates how modernism—which can “at one and the same time be read as a Utopian compensation for everything reification brings with it”—negates ideology insofar as it brings the reader to a series of limit-experiences that challenge the closure of the senses, or the hegemonic organization of the body’s relation to its material surroundings. Conrad’s impressionism is less a mimetic practice recording the
phenomenological travails of the mind than a disaggregation of the world in a sensory overload. Modernism imagines the unimaginable; it enacts a crisis of representation like a bridge without an opposite end. Yet for Jameson, modernism’s negation of ideology is always determined, confined by history to a desire to stand beyond history that is itself resolutely tied to a specific historical moment. Indeed, this paradoxical openness within closure is the implication of Jameson’s choice of the word “compensation” to qualify modernism’s “Utopia”: utopia is less the actuality of an emergent radically other world than the possibility of another world within the cracks of that same old historical present.

In Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, and Conrad in Crisis, Cesare Casarino offers a corporeal solution to Jameson’s historiographic impasse: the bodies of modernity already possess in themselves a countermodernity, an other modernity, whose space would be constituted by the becoming autonomous (from capital, from the state) of laboring flesh. Casarino explores how the chronotope of the ship in sea narratives such as Melville’s Moby Dick and Conrad’s The Secret Sharer enables one to “record the old and to envision the new.” The ship is one of those strange topological paradoxes that Michel Foucault names “heterotopia,” a space at once part of and counter to the world, possessed of “the desire to escape the social while simultaneously representing it, contesting it, inverting it—the desire to exceed the social while simultaneously transforming it.” The old space of the ship is the site of new/emergent social bonds, bonds whose primary figuration Casarino locates in the homoerotic comradery of shipmates and that act as the conditions of possibility for new social totalities or modes of production.

Passing between Spinoza and Marx, between Melville and Conrad, Casarino unfolds the flesh of countermodernity in the laboring of sailors at sea: “It is the borrowed life and time of capital and their provenance that concern me here, for such a life and such a time are plundered from that body of potestia and multitudo whose very flesh flexes around and embodies the absent presence of the other limit.” The other limit, here, is potentiality or labor power considered not merely as a historically determined capacity to produce but as a creative power that itself generates history, a power that may be captured by capital (and, I would add, the state) but whose capture is always a borrowing, always an inscription of otherness. Casarino’s method consists of identifying those moments of crisis when the borrowing and plundering of life breaks down and when there is an exodus, however fleeting, from the dictates of capital. This exodus is always an exodus of the body that “necessarily implies, projects, and demands unexpected and unforeseeable ways of moving, living, and
loving bodies.” There is, then, an excess of corporeal life over capital, a surplus of bodily gesture irreducible to subsumption. If Jameson makes utopia a sensory “compensation” for modernity, a salve to the wounds inflicted by capitalism, Casarino makes utopia a biopolitical expression; utopia is not the end of history but is its other side (heterotopia), the verso to the recto of history as disaster, the secret pleasures of bodies irreducible to capital. In technical terms, Casarino privileges the form of content, the formal dynamics in which corporeality and language become indiscernible and in excess of determination. Jameson, on the other hand, privileges the content of form, the ideological content of a particular genre or literary form insofar as it emerges from a determinate and determined historical mode of production.

Like Casarino, I wish to explore the history of other bodies that takes place in Conrad’s text, those corporeal possibilities (or forms of content) that exceed and bring to crisis the machinations of state and capital. Yet where Casarino writes “excess,” I write “ambivalence”; that is, where Casarino concerns himself primarily with the surplus over the ideological, I concern myself primarily with the slippery passage of ambivalence in which ideology and utopia intersect and blur: the zero degree of social life. If Casarino is able to locate in the ship a sliver of space within which the bodies of a radically other future may unfold, it is because a ship at sea, as he himself notes, possesses a certain distance from the control system of capitalism and of state sovereignty. At once in and out of the world, the ship, drenched in the sun’s light, makes sense as the site of meditation on an exodus from the historical present, but it also allows for the forgetting of that supplement of capital, the state. Conrad’s London, with its police, its newspapers, and its shops piled atop one another, would appear much less suited for the discovery of emergent radically other social structures. And yet my concern for ambivalence is also an analytical shift by which comes to light the unfolding of radical otherness, though less as heterotopia (which would suggest a certain autonomy) than as transfiguration, or shifting of valences. In The Secret Agent, the utopian dimension, trapped as it is in a monstrous London, never expands to take place, or to take up space, but instead always remains suspended, a potential whose gift remains inactual yet promising.

In this light, the bare life toward which the novel tends can just as well be translated as the plenitude of a life unqualified by the codes of capital and the state. The denationalized bodies of the Italian restaurant are not lacking in activity, then, but the activity they perform is invisible to the state, as suggested by the AC’s perception of these “enigmatical persons”:
Neither was their personality *stamped* in any way, professionally, socially, or racially. They seemed created for the Italian restaurant, unless the Italian restaurant had been perchance created for them. But that last hypothesis was *unthinkable*, since one could not place them anywhere outside those special establishments. One never met these *enigmatical* persons elsewhere. It was impossible to form a precise idea what occupations they followed by day and where they went to bed at night. (SA, 152; my emphasis)

In rereading these lines, it is clear that the patrons of the Italian restaurant can no longer be reduced to the raw material for the AC’s quest to secure the state or to bare life as an effect of sovereignty. Instead of a purely ideological form, bare life names the in-finite substance that exists only insofar as it articulates itself in a multiplicity of forms. If, in the above passage, these bodies remain “unthinkable” and “enigmatical” to the state, it is because the state is not coextensive with this substance but is, in fact, a delimitation of this substance. As limit, the state is a moment when the expression of substance falters, when articulation fails as it becomes absorbed into homogenizing lines of equivalence. (It should be noted, however, that the state has a life of its own and that although the state is necessarily parasitical, requiring the social as its constitutive materiality, it also carves out its own spaces and bodies, such as the bureaucracy and the military, spaces and bodies that, of course, may themselves bleed into everyday life.) The bodies of the Italian restaurant occupy a threshold situated between, on the one hand, life as colonized by the state and by capital and, on the other, life as always already pressing beyond those hegemonic forms. In this last section, I explore the central moment when life stumbles beyond these limits in *The Secret Agent*: the bomb plot and the explosion issuing from it.

The central events of *The Secret Agent* emerge from Vladimir’s intention to bring Great Britain back into line, to force it to conform to the international order. This intention takes the form of a desire to produce a violence that would be “purely destructive” and would thereby indicate that the elements of dissent “are perfectly determined to make a clean sweep of the whole social creation” (SA, 66). Vladimir predicates the provocation as well as the reaction to follow upon an image of the revolutionary as completely other to society, as radically evil. Revolution must be presented as pure, unabated death drive. Rather than a reasoned response to injustice and inequality, revolution must “be an act of destructive ferocity so absurd as to be incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable;
in fact, mad?” (SA, 67). Of course, Vladimir intends less the thing itself than a terrifying sign of it, and as such he aims at destroying not society itself but instead its complacent comfort in the ideologies sustaining it. Yet as a number of critics have argued, *The Secret Agent* is as much about the force of signs as it is about the force of deeds. Or, more precisely, the text obsesses over, even as it enacts, the radical indiscernibility between sign and action, between image and event. This indiscernibility takes a number of forms, including the discursive identities produced between pornography and revolutionary tracts, the mediation (without immediate referent) by newspapers of the effects of the bomb plot and Winnie’s suicide, and the identification of the revolutionaries, especially Verloc, with speech rather than their actions.33

Vladimir, while condemning Verloc for his lack of action, nonetheless desires an action whose effects would be primarily experienced as language, that is, a speech act. Vladimir wishes to destroy the conceptual underpinnings of progress, understood as the dominant ideology of liberal England. Lacking the ability to destroy the pure form of this ideology (how does one “throw a bomb into pure mathematics” [67]), he settles for bombing the Greenwich Observatory (the site demarcating the prime meridian) as a symbolic substitute. Bombing Greenwich may seem, at first glance, an utterly absurd gesture: Why would society see the destruction of a symbol without instrumental effect as an event harkening the apocalypse? But the truth in the bombing of Greenwich lies in the way that it symbolizes less a single point in time and space than an organization of time and space. As David Harvey suggests, Greenwich symbolizes the standardization of time and space, which from the factory floor to the world map made production and exchange more efficient, increasing the prosperity of the capital that privately owned such social technologies. Greenwich thus symbolizes the organization of the world by the twin forces of capital and the state. Harvey interprets the intention to destroy this site as a wish fulfillment on the part of Conrad, a desire to be rid of “the rigid discipline of organized public time.”34

But it would be better to give Conrad more credit and suggest that the bomb plot acts as an excuse to explore the limit of capitalist time and space as well as the limit of sovereignty. Indeed, these limits are perhaps best encapsulated in the centrality of the term “fetish” in the novel.35 From beginning to end, *The Secret Agent* deals with calculations regarding the value of life and with the social and political effects of such calculations. As Marx discusses in *Capital*, Vol. 1, *A Critique of Political Economy*, one of the striking structural aspects of capitalism is commodity fetishism, or the conversion of relationships between people into relationships between
As I have argued, one must add the calculations of the state and the production of bare life through the figure of the (non)citizen to this account, but it nonetheless remains pertinent: in *The Secret Agent*, life is constantly examined according to standards that appear to be extrinsic to it, even as these standards inform and transform life to its core. Vladimir himself becomes an analyst of fetishism, asking, “What is the fetish of the hour that all the bourgeoisie recognize—eh, Mr. Verloc?” (SA, 65) and then, answering his own question, “The sacrosanct fetish of today is science” (SA, 66). That Vladimir’s position is analytical becomes evident in the following piece of dialogue in which he diagnoses the mentality of the bourgeoisie: “They [the bourgeoisie] believe that in some mysterious way science is at the source of their material prosperity. They do. And the absurd ferocity of such a demonstration will affect them more profoundly than the mangling of a whole street—or theatre—full of people of their own kind” (SA, 67). The fetish of science is not mere illusion, which would suggest nonreality, but instead is an ideological libidinal capture, at once embodying and obscuring the productive forces of labor, the forces reproducing the social totality. Yet Vladimir’s analysis is not without its limits. He is obsessed with producing an outrage and bringing England “into line,” and his logic consists of a tenacious pseudodialectic confined to the logics of capital and sovereignty. He can imagine the maintenance of the social totality as it presently stands (the liberal status quo whom he detests as weak willed), the destruction of the social totality by revolutionaries (the radical evil whom he associates with anarchism and socialism), and a destruction of social order that would herald a protofascist multiplication of disciplines, boundaries, and rules (his own vision of provocation as catalyst for reaction). Occluded from such a view is any possibility of systemic transformation, any possibility of an end to capitalism and the nation-state that would not be a simple vision of apocalypse.

At this point, it is necessary to confront the tangled relationship involving the terms “biopolitics,” “liberal state,” and “capitalism.” If I have suggested in this essay that biopolitics simultaneously pertains to the liberal nation-state and to capitalism, it is not in order to conflate them. I would argue that capitalism is logically and historically prior to liberalism. The liberal nation-state, from this perspective, would be symptomatic of capitalism and would form a specific response to the necessity of managing labor power, that is, to the necessity of regulating life in the service of the production of capital. In claiming this priority I follow Paolo Virno, who argues that biopolitics is best understood in relation to the concept of labor power, by which he means the “potential to produce. Potential, that is to say, aptitude, capacity, *dynamis*. Generic, undetermined potential:
where one particular type of labor or another has not been designated, but any kind of labor is taking place.” Virno goes on to argue that the “crucial point” is that

where something which exists only as possibility is sold, this something is not separable from the living person of the seller. The living body of the worker is the substratum of that labor-power which, in itself, has no independent existence. ‘Life,’ pure and simple bios, acquires a specific importance in as much as it is the tabernacle of dynamis, of mere potential. (GM, 82)

Biopolitics thus names the intersection of this pure potential to produce and the emergence of specific bodies in which this potential inheres. Capital requires that the relationship between potentiality and corporeality always be such that it is conducive to the generation of profits, that is, to the extraction of surplus value. This demand inscribes itself in life as an ever-renewed process of organization and delimitation. The multiplicities that compose life, which may engender a number of potential bodies, must be limited to the One (in its long philosophical trajectory) that would be profitable (or rather to the many forms of the One). The liberal state’s policing is one way of producing this limitation.

Vladimir, of course, intends the destruction of Greenwich to result not in revolution but in provocation and a reactionary crackdown. Vladimir is the most frenzied and reductive of Hegelians, envisioning the recuperation of a pure act of negation by forces of order. But Conrad, on the other hand, admits to moments when, possessed of “a more concentrated purpose,” he is an “extreme revolutionist.” What this means, practically, is that Vladimir’s intention misfires and, in doing so, incites the revolutionary movement it was meant to prevent. Circulated through Verloc, the Professor, and Stevie, the intention to create a proper line of order results in a series of disarticulations, which have as their effect the incomplete or suspended realization of a potential for revolution. This suspended realization takes place at the level of form of content, standing in opposition to the pure level of form, which is perhaps best thought of in terms of Conrad’s ironic rotation between characters in a series of satirical portraits. In other words, the irony of the novel, Conrad’s “business of writing” or the witty critique of the so-called revolutionary underground and the police, is overtaken by the overdetermined connections between bodies and languages. There is, I would argue, a love of life in Conrad’s fiction that moves the text, at once, to call for the razing to the ground
of an ill social world and the redemption, without transcendence, of the bodies within it.

Everything, then, takes place between bodies. Even the bomb plot begins with idle flesh. Before revealing his plan to Verloc, who will be responsible for its execution, Vladimir accuses Verloc of being “a lazy fellow” (SA, 59). This accusation follows a visual survey in which Verloc is declared “corpulent” (SA, 59), indicating not only that he lacks an ethic of work but also that he fails to live up to the physical stereotype of the starving anarchist he is supposed to play in his role as secret agent. Vladimir interprets Verloc’s corpulence as a sign of his inactivity and nonutility. Vladimir goes on to assure Verloc that the secret service for which he works “is not a philanthropic institution,” that he must commit an act in order to earn his living or otherwise be deemed a worthless parasite (SA, 59). This injunction to work, this command to make oneself useful, serves as the motor of the plot. The narrative moves to the rhythm of a demand for production and profit. In this rhythm, every body begins as a zero, as pure waste or bare life conceived of negatively, until it puts its life at the service of profit and produces calculable results, or in Marx’s words, the “free wage-worker” has “no value; it is rather his power of disposing of his labor . . . which has value. It is not he who stands towards the capitalist as exchange value, but the capitalist towards him.”

The Secret Agent is a diagnostic apparatus registering the worth of specific kinds of lives. From this perspective, Verloc, “famous for years at open-air meetings and workmen’s assemblies,” is considered all talk and no action (SA, 60). Indeed, the novel cites Verloc’s central values as “repose” and “security” and describes his “dislike for all kinds of recognized labor—a temperamental defect which he shared with a large proportion of revolutionary reformers of a given social state” (SA, 82). Indeed, the other so-called revolutionaries (“revolutionary reformers”) are all marked by an indolence that takes place at the level of temperament and physical constitution. Verloc’s desire for repose matches his corpulence, Karl Yundt’s passion for destruction fits his thin-stretched and skeletal frame, Ossipon’s insufficient power of scientific reason correlates to his appearance as “of the Negro type” (SA, 82), and Michaelis’s obesity follows from his passive vision of economic determinism. The entire network of supposed revolutionaries signifies less a concerted effort to overturn the order of things than an organized refusal to work. This refusal receives further qualification when Conrad writes that “obviously one does not revolt against the advantages and opportunities of the state, but against the price that must be paid in the coin of accepted morality, self-restraint, and toil” (SA, 82). Currency, here, acts as a sign
attaching to the idlers of the novel in order to label them as social waste. 
Born into the benefits of the liberal welfare state, their life invested—in 
every sense of the term—by advantages, these are the individuals who 
fail to pay back the debt entailed in being a citizen. The “price” of citi-
zension is, notably, those demands associated with the protestant work 
ethic, those attributes that would make a body productive and prof-
it able. In rejecting this price, in stealing time, these individuals exile 
themselves from respectable society.

But if these idlers amount, from the perspective of capital and the state, 
to social waste, it is only insofar as, like the patrons of the Italian res-

taurant, they insist on living in ways unqualified by the codes of capital and 
the state. In other words, on the one hand, certainly these figures are hom-
mes de ressentiment, figures whose rage implies a pettiness lending itself 
to co-optation. It is not merely that they make speeches instead of acting 
that makes them amenable to co-optation but that they often serve, like 
Michaelis with his lady patron, as no more than the hangers-on of “respect-
able” company. On the other hand, they also act as witnesses to the very po-
tential for living otherwise, for a life beyond the constraints of capitalism. 
They exist in a time subtracted from the regime of efficiency, embodying a 
tendency toward radical social negation in their refusal to labor, and they 
imitate a space in which labor would no longer be necessary, at least not in 
the sense implied by the “price” of citizenship.42 (This gesture of refusal is 
to be contrasted to the more resigned gesture of self-abnegation performed 
by Winnie’s mother when she consigns herself to an almshouse in order to 
spare Verloc the burden of her nonproductive existence.43 The difference 
is that which exists between a negation of value as transvaluation of values 
and a negation of value as reinforcement of value.)

Vladimir’s intention to destroy the symbol of the “price” of citizen-
ship (Greenwich) in order to provoke a reaction shoring it up trans-
forms into its opposite: an immanent presence short-circuiting the lines 
of capital and the state, creating holes in the biopolitical matrices of 
power.44 Short circuits, however, are occasional. They are tactical nega-
tions that depend upon the system that they break down for the energy 
that supports them. While they may intimate the beyond produced by 
a revolution, they also preserve the relations they strive to overcome. 
There is, however, another figure of thought who might push the tacti-
cal maneuvers of the idlers toward the event of revolution. The Pro-
fessor (it is only by this title that he is known) provides the image of a 
figure who would work for revolution. He is a builder of bombs, will-
ing to give his explosive devices to anyone who would use them. Indeed,
he provides the bomb that is supposed to destroy Greenwich. More importantly, however, the Professor theorizes revolution as an absolute event, one that would generate Vladimir’s “clean sweep” by exploding the very worldliness of the world. The Professor conceives of the world as a negative totality in which revolution, as imagined by idlers such as Ossipon (to whom he speaks in the following passage), is but a counter-move to police action in the game of society proper:

Like to like. The terrorist and the policeman both come from the same basket. Revolution, legality—counter moves in the same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical. He [Inspector Heat] plays his little game—so do you propagandists. But I don’t play; I work fourteen hours a day, and go hungry sometimes. My experiments cost money now and again, and then I must do without food for a day or two. Yes. I have had two glasses already, and shall have another presently. This is a little holiday, and I celebrate it alone. Why not? I’ve the grit to work alone, quite alone, absolutely alone. I’ve worked alone for years. (S, 94)

Both the activities of the revolutionaries and those of the police reduce themselves to countermoves in a game whose rules are always already predetermined. The terrorist deed that is supposed to shake society becomes fuel for the crackdown that tightens it. The crackdown itself fuels further deeds of dissent. This is the game of sovereignty, described by Walter Benjamin as a cycle between law-making and law-preserving violence. In this loop, the force of each side is, in the last instance, redirected toward the preservation of the status quo: the past and future of a “game” is, of necessity, reducible to an eternal present without horizon (the eternity of a priori or transcendent rules), to a play of turns that may differ in their details but whose horizon is always fixed. Terrorist and policeman become identical when considered retrospectively across this “homogeneous, empty time.” This temporality describes the “forms of idleness” to which the Professor reduces the work of men such as Ossipon and Verloc because the implications of this game are precisely that means and ends are so finely determined as to exclude any chance event that might exceed the calculation of the rules.

It is life itself that forms the substance of this game, life as articulated in its different biopolitical forms, and it is life that the Professor casts himself opposite:
Their character is built upon conventional morality. It leans on social order. Mine stands free from everything artificial. They are bound in all sorts of convention. They depend on life, which, in this connection, is a historical fact surrounded by all sorts of restraints and considerations, a complex organized fact open to attack at every point; whereas I depend on death, which knows no restraint and cannot be attacked. My superiority is evident. (SA, 93)

It is perhaps necessary to reiterate that “order” here implies a specific regime of value, one that forms individuals who are born in debt to the state. To make one’s living is to work off this infinite debt, to accumulate value so as to avoid becoming social waste. In occupying the position of death, the Professor is able, at one and the same time, to conceive of a homogenous totality and to make this totality not all, that is, to define totality as that which produces a remainder in excess of it. This remainder does not consist of a nothingness transcendent to the order of things, nor does it imply a primal force that has escaped the Fall. It consists, rather, of the intimation of a plenitude irreducible to exchange value and order and yet immanent to the social totality as that which is an excess and pressing beyond it. Such is the implication of the Professor’s in-finite drinking (“I have had two glasses already, and shall have another presently”), which refuses to confine drinking to a temperate measure. Such is the implication, more importantly, of the Professor’s particular work ethic. Whereas the revolutionary idlers are content to play a game of measured, predetermined rules (or of an internal negation of such rules), the Professor works in excess and yet immanent to measure through experimentation: “But I don’t play; I work fourteen hours a day, and go hungry sometimes. My experiments cost money now and again, and them I must do without food for a day or two.” Experimentation names a form of life productive outside the regime of value, which sets its own ends beyond profit and validates itself not in the repetition of the same but in the generation of the new. The ascetic thrust of this work ethic is far exceeded by the intensity of the literally explosive effects that it produces. Finally, the Professor’s status as remainder confirms itself in his absolute solitude: “I’ve the grit to work alone, quite alone, absolutely alone. I’ve worked alone for years.” The intensifying repetition of this solitude may be said to enact the process of subtraction that experimentation demands as its presupposition. To produce new forms of life in excess of the biopolitical regime of value, one must first negate the threads by which one’s conduct is wedded
to the regime. In short, the Professor acts as an image of activity and potentiality liberated from discipline and control, subtracted from the state form and capital—an image of a life lived for itself.

And yet one must hesitate, given the Professor’s identification with a solitary death. Several critics note that the Professor’s desire is tinged by a deep streak of ressentiment. The text would seem to verify such readings when it tells the Professor’s story as one of a boy of “humble origin” who attends the university driven by “tales of men rising from the depths of poverty to positions of authority and affluence” but who fails in his quest and, out of frustration, sublimates his failure as the desire to destroy society (SA, 102). The text then distills this back-story into the dictum that “the way of even the most justifiable revolutions is prepared by personal impulses disguised into creeds” (SA, 102). The Professor’s utopian desire for a cleared space becomes reducible to the psychological reflex of ressentiment.

We must insist, however, on the ambivalence of the biopolitical as a dialectic between ideology and utopia. The Professor may exist within the circuits of capital and the state, and he may purchase his drinks at the same bar as any other and be possessed of the same feelings of ressentiment, but he is nevertheless the incarnation of a real process of revolution. The Professor stands on the side of a paradoxical death, paradoxical because it indicates, at one and the same time, an absolute negation (an end to all life amenable to capital and the state) and an infinite productivity (a mode of creation and expression beyond the differentiation of the dominant form of biopolitics). J. Hillis Miller nicely elaborates upon this “living death”:

The theme of The Secret Agent is the universal death which underlies life. As the characters get closer to death, they approach a condition in which they are the equivalents of one another. There all “I’s” give way to a collective “we,” and communication is possible, communication not between persons, but within that which in each person is the same, the same secret agent at the heart of each.

A death that underlies life is not a death at all but instead is a life perceived from the wrong side of utopia. The community that Miller observes emerging in the The Secret Agent is not really one of equivalences but rather one of a commonality existing at the ontological core (“heart”) of beings. One has already seen this commonality in the “unthinkable” bodies of the Italian restaurant. These unplaced, unstamped, denationalized bodies are the
materializations of the potential for new ways of life. They are the forms of being corresponding to the revolutionary activity of the Professor. If they appear all the same from one perspective, it is only the perspective of exchange value, which views life in the quantified and substitutable terms of profit, or the perspective of the national people, which views life in terms of abstract rights to citizenship. In the phrase “the same secret agent at the heart of each,” Miller more interestingly suggests a shared potential to escape equivalence, to form a space beyond the rationalized exchange proper to capital, to engender bodies that live a *sameness composed of singularities* (“the heart of each”).49 One stumbles when encountering these bodies. One fails to see them, because they are already beyond one’s proper place and in their own unplaced place: “They seemed created for the Italian restaurant, unless the Italian restaurant had perchance been created for them. But that last hypothesis was unthinkable.” When Conrad writes that it is “impossible to form a precise idea what occupations they followed by day and where they went to bed at night,” he gestures toward an instant of time rupturing the homogenous line of the wage clock and the cycles of sovereignty. The experimental life of the Professor and the unqualified life of the Italian restaurant’s patrons are the expression, as biopolitical utopian surplus, of new social relations, however tentative.

When Conrad admits that he himself is an “extreme revolutionary,” he is thinking of the strange lives of the Italian restaurant and the experiments of the Professor, and when he says that he is simply attending to his “business,” it is because his business is writing, and it is in the very form of this novel that one discovers a revolutionary excess of potential. But it is also his business, because one’s labor still belongs to capital, and one’s life still takes place within the purview of the state; there is an undeniable biopolitics of control pervading every inch of this text, an inescapability from the gravity wells of capital and sovereignty. But if the revolution of this novel is not actual, if it can never quite realize itself but rather remains suspended, taut as a quivering chord, tense against the limit of being—namely, *in crisis*—it nevertheless persists and insists as potential. The consequences of this potential are, however, neither given nor predictable. There is no guarantee that what will arrive from this biopolitical ambivalence is not a disaster, the annihilation or consumption of life by capital and/or the state. Nor is there any guarantee that we will not be held in suspense, endlessly repeating our entanglement in capital and the state. Our only guarantee is the ambivalence of Conrad’s modernist exploration of political life. From this perspective, we still wait for the patrons of the Italian restaurant and for that “extreme revolutionary,” Joseph Conrad, in all their shared ambivalence.
Christian Haines is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. His dissertation, “A Desire Called America: Biopolitics and Utopian Forms of Life in American Literature,” explores corporeal expressions of utopia and the common in American literature. He has published articles on biopolitics, literary modernism, and Marxism in Angelaki and Cultural Critique.

NOTES

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2. I allude to the arguments of Hay and Fleishman, despite their datedness, because their interpretive decisions are paradigmatic insofar as they have supported a number of other readings and insofar as they correspond to hegemonic liberal conceptions of the political that, I argue, Conrad problematizes. See Eloise Knapp Hay, The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Study (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), and Avrom Fleishman, Conrad’s Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), 185–215.


6. Ibid., 515.


8. Conrad’s competition with the anarchists—his attempt to outdo them in producing social effects—has been discussed by a number of critics. See especially Jonathan Arac, “Romanticism, the Self, and the City: The Secret Agent in Literary History,” boundary 2, 9, no. 1 (1980): 75–90; and Peter Lancelot Mallios, “Reading The Secret Agent Now: The Press, the Police, the Premonition of Simulation,” in Conrad in the Twenty-First Century: Contemporary Approaches and Perspectives, edited by Carola M. Kaplan, Peter Lancelot Mallios, and Andrea White, 155–75 (New York: Routledge, 2005).

9. This position on The Secret Agent is especially prevalent in a strand of Marxist criticism, which seeks to redeem Conrad, to save him from his reactionary tendencies, by noting
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10. In A Thousand Plateaus, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari follow Louis Hjelmslev in dividing linguistic expression into two planes (content and expression) that are in turn divided into oppositions between substance and form. Lacking the space to unpack the complexities of this schema, I can only say that what is significant for my argument is less the oppositions themselves than the passages between them, especially insofar as they indicate points at which corporeal matter becomes signifying matter or vice versa. From this perspective, the signifier constitutes a congealment or tentative synthesis of already formed matter, which is not to say that matter is outside language but rather that matter is irreducible to language, that there is a silent flow of material organization inhering in language as its constitutive outside. Such a complication of the signifier-signedified and form-content oppositions is meant to trouble the operations of structuralism, which tends to involve the carving out of static systems of signs. (I should note that in fact, what I am calling “form of content” is closer in this schema to formed substance. I retain this term because it is more recognizable in literary scholarship.) See especially Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987 [1980]), chaps. 3–5.


12. If Fredric Jameson’s concept of national allegory is inadequate to describe the form of content in Joseph Conrad’s The Secret Agent, so too is Edward Said’s contrapuntal reading, which reads the work of Joseph Conrad relationally in order to uncover the repressed material of their colonial histories. The undecidability or phenomenological haziness surrounding the national identities of characters renders problematic the use of these nationally oriented methods. They are useful nonetheless, as I hope to have shown, precisely at the moment when they fail to account for workings of the text, when they crumble and reveal the presence of a new form of content demanding a new biopolitical mode of elaboration. See Fredric Jameson, “National Allegory in Wyndham Lewis,” in The Jameson Reader, edited by Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks, 308–15 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); and Edward Said, “Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories,” in Culture and Imperialism, 3–62 (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).


15. Anticipating the radical quality with which I associate the clientele of the Italian restaurant below, it is worth noting that the underground newspapers of the radical Left in England generally fell under the category of “unstamped” newspapers, that is, journals that had not received official approval. Mallios, “Reading The Secret Agent Now,” 158–60.


21. I owe this point to a conversation in 2009 with Cesare Casarino.

22. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 257. While there is not enough space in this essay for a complex engagement with the work of Benjamin, I want only to add the point that insofar as biopolitics involves the management of potentiality/labor power/life, its composition is one of temporality. Benjamin’s well-known opposition between now-time (Jetzzeit) and “homogenous, empty time” suggests a biopolitical antagonism between two relations of life to time.

23. Agamben complicates this picture himself in several of his other works. See especially Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, translated by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 [1990]). Agamben articulates what is less a transcendence than an immanent bursting of the seams of the social totality. This form of resistance characterizes itself through, on the one hand, a negation of political spacing and a generalization of the life within it. This is what is called whatever-being. On the other hand, this generalization becomes the opening for the production of singularities—multiplicities outside of exchange—that relate without hierarchy. *The Coming Community* sketches the emergence of this new form of political life by exposing the ontological consequences of a series of phenomenological fragments. The last section of my essay owes a tremendous debt to this Agamben.


25. Ibid., 236.

26. Ibid., 237.


29. Ibid., 103.

30. Ibid., 104

31. This is not to say that Jameson ignores form of content—he does not—but that his final dialectic move, as he himself notes, is the determination of the content of form. See Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers* (New York: Verso, 2007), xiv–xx. Notably, I conceive of
form of content differently than Jameson, who considers it to be, for the most part, the shifting ideological lenses of a text as distinct from the thing-in-itself of the text’s referents. Jameson notes that the form of content partakes of a Kantian modality, whereas my understanding of the term, following the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, places it within a Spinozist modality of expression. See note 10 above.

32. The difference between us is perhaps less a difference in kind than a difference of perspective, and this difference of perspective may arise from the fact that in The Secret Agent, we are not at sea but instead are caught in that “monstrous town,” “that cruel devourer of the world’s light,” London (SA, 40–41). Indeed, different considerations would perhaps be in play in those texts, such as Chance, Lord Jim, and Heart of Darkness, in which the narrative crosses back and forth between land-based and sea-based chronotopes rather than remaining within one or the other.

33. On this radical indiscernibility between sign and action, see especially Mallios, “Reading The Secret Agent Now.” On the identity between pornography and revolutionary discourse, see Shaffer, “The Commerce of Shady Wares”; and Oliver, “Conrad’s Grotesque Public.” While I agree that such discursive identities are produced, I do not think that the politics of the novel is reducible to such identities. The surplus that I identify as form of content contests the exclusivity of such interpretations without, however, rendering them void.

34. David Harvey, “Money, Time, Space and City,” in The Urban Experience (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 182.


37. In another version of this essay, I extensively discuss the instrumentalization of life for capital. Focusing upon Winnie’s mother, I argue that one of the main tendencies of the novel is a weighing of life according to its efficiency, productivity, and profitability. Instrumentalization names the process by which the potential invested in social relations is circumscribed in order to reproduce capital.


39. In a longer version of this essay, I discuss the concept of policing in greater depth. Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault, I argue that policing is the assemblage of tactics that attempts to subordinate life to the good of the state. Policing obviously is a function of the content of the The Secret Agent, but it is more importantly also a formal dynamic of the text. It is that tendency in the text to produce centers of gravity—norms—that regulates the flow of language and sets limits on the development of new corporealities. See especially Michel Foucault, Security, Territory, Population, translated by Graham Burchell, edited by Michael Senellart (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007 [1977–78]), esp. 311–63. See also Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” and D. A. Miller, The Novel and the Police (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

40. On the subject of the overdetermination of form in the novel in terms of its usurpation of intentionality and in relation to irony, see English, “Anarchy in the Flesh.”

42. Such a politics of refusal is exemplary of what has come to be known as Autonomist Marxism, originating in the Autonomia movement in the Italy of the 1970s. See especially Mario Tronti, “The Strategy of Refusal,” in Autonomia: Post-Political Politics, special issue of Semiotext(e) 3, no. 3 (1980): 28–34. Of the many thinkers associated with this social movement, the work of Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno has most directly contributed to this essay. From Negri, I take the focus upon the construction of alternative subjectivities immanent to capitalist and statist forms of domination. The negation of capitalist forms of value clears the way for the autonomous emergence of these subjects; that is, it clears a space for the development of an already immanent and imminent new form of life. From Virno, I take my focus upon the ambivalence of the capitalist life-world as well as the concern for the incarnation of potentiality (capacities for action or labor: labor power) in the construction of subjects.

43. Conrad, S4, 154–58.

44. That Conrad was nostalgic for labor as such, for the body at work and the solidarity produced by laboring collectively, does not prevent him from desiring an end to labor as subordinated to capital. Indeed, quite the opposite is true: the reduction of human production to the reproduction of the capital, with its concomitant fragmentation and dissolution of the social bonds of labor, constitutes the motor of Conrad’s desire for a world beyond labor. On Conrad and labor, see especially Jameson, “Romance and Reification: Plot Construction and Ideological Closure in Joseph Conrad,” in The Political Unconscious, and Rob Breton, Gospels and Grit: Work and Labour in Carlyle, Conrad, and Orwell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), chap. 2, “Joseph Conrad.”

45. See Benjamin, “Critique of Violence.”

46. Although it would be impossible to elaborate on the philosophical conditions and implications of this analysis in terms of the not-all, I would at least like to gesture toward a few of the thinkers: Jacques Lacan, Alain Badiou, and Kiarina Kordela. See especially Alain Badiou, Being and Event, translated by Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2005 [1988]); Jacque Lacan, Le Séminaire, livre XX: Encore (Paris: Seuil, 1975); and Kiarina Kordela, $urplus (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007). The not-all names at once the impossibility of totalizing reality in the name of the One, that is, the presence of a necessary remainder, whether or not this remainder can be identified, and a positive condition, or surplus, of matter irreducible to conceptual identity and possessed of a libidinal intensity that disrupts the construction of normal corporeality.


48. The distinction between commonality and sameness is at the heart of the philosophical and political thought of several contemporary thinkers, especially Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, and Jean-Luc Nancy. One of the most interesting aspects of this strand of thought is the way that it cuts through the political and social antinomies of liberal thought (but also of many other forms of political thought), especially those that set liberty and equality, the individual and the collective, and the private and the public in opposition. As in the discourse of biopolitics, the discourse of the common displaces the dimension of the political into the social and makes the power of bodies, or the potentiality of various forms of life, the source of new institutional developments. See especially Jean-Luc Nancy and Christophe Bailly, La Comparution: Politique à venir (Paris: C. Bourgois, 1991); Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire (New York: Penguin, 2004); Virno, A Grammar of the Multitude, esp. 196–219; and Cesare Casarino, “Surplus Common,” in Cesare Casarino and Antonio Negri, In Praise of the Common, 1–39 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).