

Ah-Qism of Politics: Transformation of Defeat into Victory as the Political

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Western Political Science Association Meeting 2014

Panel:

Repetition as Resistance: Plasticity and the Creative Potential of the Habitual Encounter

Abstract:

Based on Lu Xun's *The True Story of Ah Q* I mobilize the concept of Ah-Qism to reinterpret subjectivity and the political. Ah-Qism is the transformation of merely zoological life (*zoe*) into historical or political life (*bios*). I will argue that subjectivity and the political momentarily emerge through this transformation, which Lu Xun's text represents through Ah Q's repeated encounter with stronger persons and his ability to 'transform defeat into spiritual victory.' An important implication of this argument is that conventional concerns of 'politics' such as force, domination, and hierarchy are not primarily within the purview of the study of politics but of the study of animal behavior. While force is the basis of all individuation, it is necessary but insufficient for individuation qua subjectivity. Power difference and subjection is the norm of all ethological experience, but a unique mode of experience is available to subjected persons like Ah Q: political experience. Political experience occurs when past subjection is transformed into subjectivity. However, political experience is relatively infrequent and ephemeral. Furthermore, the political cannot be celebrated nor condemned a priori since its effects can be, from a given perspective, affirming or nihilistic. A second implication is that empire and revolution are also not political but rather limits to the political. A third implication is that fantasy has an ambiguous relation to the political.

Keywords: Ah-Qism, subjectivity, the political, transformation, ethology

Ah-Qism of Politics

Introduction

Lu Xun published *The True Story of Ah Q* (阿Q正传) between 1921 and 1922, at the tail of the New Culture Movement. Given its historical context, the text has found a canonical place in the national allegory genre.¹ In the conventional interpretation exemplified by Feng Xuefeng, the allegory serves as a critical device, indicting China's "national failing," for which Ah Q's spiritual or psychological gymnastics are a microcosm.² I will argue that the significance of Lu Xun's text is both deeper and more specific, and that it can offer aid for thought on the processes and instantiations of politics.

Concretely, from Lu Xun's text I extract a concept, Ah-Qism, and mobilize it in an arguably radical reinterpretation of 'the political.' This reinterpretation moves away from conventional conceptions that confuse the ethological for the political. Conventionally, force and violence, power, domination, decision, hierarchy, and empire are considered to be the 'essence' of the political. However, at times with only modest variation of degree and scale, such phenomena are present in the behavior of most high-grade animals (and with a greater variation, but still only of degree and scale, in the mechanical relations among atomic particles, or among all 'forces' in Nietzsche's sense of the word). Such phenomena have a transcendental relation to the political; that is, they are among its conditions of possibility. But something different constitutes the core of the political: the transformation of 'defeat' into 'victory,' of subjection into a moment of subjectivity. The concept of Ah-Qism helps to represent for thought and discourse the processes of transformation that constitute a given instance of politics. It turns out,

¹ Paul Foster cites Mao Dun in characterizing Ah Q as an analogue of the Chinese nation parallel to the same function of Goncharov's Oblomov in relation to Russia's national character. Paul Foster, *Ah Q Archeology*, p. 179. Another important example of the national allegory in fiction is the novel *Mr. President* by Nobel-laureate Miguel Angel Asturias.

² Feng Hsueh-feng, "On 'The True Story of Ah Q,'" in *The True Story of Ah Q*, by Lu Hsun, pp. 91–110.

then, that much of what is conventionally thought as political, such as ‘war’ and domination of other agents, is not so. That sort of phenomena is part of the ‘normal’ order toward which things tend. Politics is always something much more delimited, modest, intimate, and ephemeral. It occurs only at the underside of order, within and among subjugated unities and multiplicities, such that there is no subjectivity without subjection. Therefore, the *subject*, in both senses of the term, is the only political agent. Political agency, finally, is not the capacity to change the status quo of power in the future (revolution), or the present activity of visualizing such change (fantasy), but a moment, ambiguous in its effects, of revaluation or transformation of the past.

The argument will be overall of exploratory character. With the exception of a close reading of Weber’s conceptualization of politics, the paper is largely limited to suggest potential lines of correspondence with the work of other thinkers and with broad problems that concern political thinkers and scientists, such as history, empire, and revolution.

1. Ah Q as subject

The basis of my reinterpretation of the political, the subject, and political agency, is induced by *The True Story of Ah Q*. In basic terms, the *Story* is an account, brilliant in its undecidability of irony and literality,³ of Ah Q’s ‘victories’ and of his fateful failure to join a revolution. Ah-Q, like Dostoevsky’s Underground Man,⁴ finds himself in an arguably modern position: he holds a strong conception of his worth *as an individual*, while lacking the bodily, economic, and social resources to attain from his peers the recognition to which he thinks himself principally entitled.⁵

Time after time, his acute self-worth leads him to verbal and physical confrontations, from which,

³ 正传 (zhèng zhuàn): true story. Note that the translation of 正 (zhèng) as ‘true’ is derivative of the more direct meaning of this character: correct, just, righteous. The story, in its fictiveness, would do justice to the facts of Ah Q’s life. The matter, however, is not as simple, as demonstrated by the author-within-the-text’s struggle to decide what sort of biography he is to offer.

⁴ See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*. Within Lu Xun’s literary works, Kong Yiji is another important analogical literary personage.

⁵ This predicament would highlight the material, or, more precisely, the bodily aspect that is missing in a Hegelian dialectic of recognition.

due to his weak constitution, he seldom fares well. Banging Ah Q's head against a wall four or five times in such encounters attains the status of convention. However, Ah Q displays a formidable psychological and affective ability to transform each episode of defeat into a spiritual (精神) victory (translated also as 'moral' or 'psychological' victory)⁶ and to promptly forget past injuries. Those who refuse to acknowledge Ah Q as an equal (if not as the first among equals), are in his mind lowered to being his 'sons'.

...in the end they would come to blows. Then only after Ah Q, to all appearances, had been defeated, had his brownish pigtail pulled and his head bumped against the wall four or five times, would the idlers walk away, satisfied at having won the victory. Ah Q would stand there for a second, thinking to himself, "It is as if I were beaten by my own son. What is the world coming to nowadays. . . ." Thereupon he too would walk away, satisfied at having won the victory (13).⁷

Once his abusers became aware of Ah Q's means of achieving such spiritual victories, in subsequent encounters they attempt to forestall him:

"Ah Q, this is not a son beating his father, it is a man beating a beast [畜生].⁸ Let's hear you say it: A man beating a beast!" (13).

⁶ The word 精神 (jīngshén) is one of those words constituted by two characters which individually have roughly the same acceptations (though the meanings of 精 are more diverse), with the most basic sense of each being 'spirit'. Acceptations within this sense of 'spirit' encompass pure potentialities of being, as in the ineffability of the Tao (道) as well as in the vitalism more known in Western thought, or as articulated in the work of Henri Bergson or, more arguably, in some aspects of Alfred Whitehead's philosophy. They also range from the spirits of this world, such as the minor deities of classical mythologies or the immaterial being of various animisms, to the spirit or souls of humans, to transcendent gods. The point of this semantic examination is to highlight the broadness of the term 精神 that corresponds more closely to the broadness of the English word 'heart' than to the more common translations 'mind' or 'soul'.

⁷ All quotations are from the 1953 Foreign Languages Press (Peking, China) translation. The name of the translator is not provided in this print.

⁸ The word translated here as beast used in the original text is 畜生 (Chùshēng). Translated more literally as 'animal life,' 'beast life,' or 'crude life,' it better approaches the sense that Arendt gives to the term *zoe*. It might also be a better approximation to what Agamben calls 'bare life.' See Hannah Arendt, "The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern," particularly p. 279. See also Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

Ah Q complies. But in doing so, he becomes profoundly a beast, transcending beastly life (*zoe*) and approaching subjectivity (*bios*). This scene encapsulates my reinterpretation of the political.

“Beating an insect [虫豸]⁹—how about that? I am an insect—now will you let me go?”

However, although he was an insect, the idlers would not let him go until they had knocked his head four or five times against something nearby, according to their custom, after which they would walk away satisfied that they had won the victory, confident this time that Ah Q was done for (13–4).

The idlers’ preemption is unsuccessful. Ah Q as subject is formidable:

But in less than ten seconds, Ah Q would walk away also satisfied that he had won the victory, thinking that he was the “foremost self-belittler,”¹⁰ and that after subtracting “self-belittler” what remained was “foremost.” Was not the highest successful candidate in the official examination also the “foremost”? “And what do you think you are?” he would say (14).

The rapid efficacy of Ah Q’s transformation of defeat into victory is stunning: ‘in less than ten seconds. . .’ This is an ‘ability to forget’ of which even Nietzsche would be envious.¹¹ But not

⁹ The word 虫豸 (Chóngzhì) is composed of two characters each of which can signify insect in general. The second character also refers more particularly to limbless insects as well as snakes, that is, creatures which must drag themselves on the ground. For this reason Julia Lovell’s decision to translate the word as ‘slug’ should be of interest. It is an opportune translation for it effectively conveys the intended sense of the original word to refer not just to any insect, not to an insect that can jump or fly, but to an insect that must drag itself low on the ground. It is useful to highlight this sense of the word also for the purposes of my argument, as it better relates to my claim that subjectivity comes from the bottom, the underside, of subjection. See Lovell’s translation in the Penguin Books edition of the text in Lu Xun, *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China*.

¹⁰ It must have been no easy task to translate the expression in the original text: 第一个能够自轻自贱的人(dì yī gè nénggòu zì qīng zì jiàn de rén); very roughly and literally, ‘the number one person at being able to self-lower and self-despise,’ or, a bit less literally, number one at making oneself feel worthless. Julia Lovell’s translation is ‘the top self-abaser.’ While the ‘foremost self-belittler’ and ‘top self-abaser’ translations are more than adequate, it is useful to bring to attention the slightly more elaborate phrasing (though the original probably does not sound particularly verbose to the native speaker of Chinese) of the original, which underscores the creative stretch to which Ah Q may avail himself in transforming past defeat into a victory.

¹¹ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*.

only forgetting but real jollity and peace follows from the transformation of these encounters within Ah Q's spirit:

After employing various such cunning devices to get even with his enemies, Ah Q would make his way cheerfully to the wineshop to drink a few bowls of wine, joke with the others again, quarrel with them again, come off victorious again, and return cheerfully to the Tutelary God's Temple, there to fall asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow (14).

'As soon as his head touched the pillow.' From the 'war' of habitual encounters with stronger entities Ah Q moves adroitly to the peace of near-instantaneous 'peace.'

The profundity of Ah Q's victories, of his attained jollity and peace, is highlighted at a time in which he comes to a theretofore closest instance of definitive defeat, when his Ah-Qism is pushed toward its limit. After losing a gamble-earned fortune, he finds a way to claim spiritual triumph by having his hand slap his face, as if the hand and the face belong to *different* and *polarized* individuals, the one victor and the other subjected:

So white and glittering a pile of silver! It had all been his . . . but now it had disappeared. Even to consider it tantamount to being robbed by his son could not comfort him; to consider himself as an insect could not comfort him either: so this time he really tasted something of the bitterness of defeat.

But presently he changed defeat into victory. Raising his right hand he slapped his own face hard twice, so that it tingled with pain. After this slapping his heart felt lighter, for it seemed as if the one who had given the slap was himself, the one slapped some other self, and soon it was just as if he had beaten someone else—in spite of the fact that his face was still tingling. He lay down satisfied that he had gained the victory.

Soon he was asleep (16–7)

2. *Ah-Qism of subjectivity*

It is difficult to say anything more about this point in the *Story* without beginning the work of political theorization, for the scene foregrounds, from the perspective of a philosophy of difference, two issues that are interrelated and fundamental to political thought: individuation (of which both sovereignty and subjectivity are modes) and force. (Since Ah Q slaps his face twice, this scene is also suggestive of the role of repetition in individuation, and on this point Deleuze's insights would likely be very relevant, but I will not explicitly pursue this line of comparison here, though it can be read into what follows.)¹² When Ah Q slaps his face as the face of another, he plays with and from difference, prevailing through a temporary condensation of difference which provides the basis for two provisional individuations, for the one who overcomes and the one who submits. This equilibration of difference lasts long enough in this case to afford a peaceful satisfaction. The duplication of the blow adds to the consolidation of individuation, the first opening up the loop of an otherwise indistinct line, and the second bringing the loop to a close, leaving behind a distinct entity or concrescence. In this manner Lu Xun intimates an insight about individuation from the standpoint of a philosophy of difference and of evolution or plasticity—a philosophy to which Nietzsche would say 'yes' and which Whitehead would locate speculatively within the processes of actualization of entities.¹³

The materiality of the slap, of force in general, claims protagonism in the play of difference and identity, in the process of individuation. At a crucial moment in which mental work is not enough to solidify the particular individuation of the triumph of the self, and with this triumph an ongoing maintenance of the self itself, a physical blow is required to reevaluate

¹² Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*.

¹³ Alfred Whitehead, *Process and Reality*.

the sense of existing forces and establish a new relation of dominance and submission from the perspective of an entity (which may be but is not necessarily an incipient and developing subject). The physical (and repeated) force that individuates Ah Q's self, without further qualification, is an instance, at the scale of a single organism, of a process of individuation which has manifestations of correspondingly different scales within households, among gangs, and between nations—self laceration, familial hierarchization, ritual initiation, and international relations are expressions of the ongoing and provisional drawing of lines within and among unities and multiplicities that form alliances by making use of the physicality of force. The preeminence of material force in individuation is magnified in the mode of sovereignty, whereby 'the one' is individuated *over* 'the other' with a pretension of absoluteness or finality, and can be characterized, with Derrida, as the beastly side of sovereignty, any sovereignty.¹⁴ Force is essential to the individuation of the sovereign. More generally, force is a feature of all power differentials inherent in all relations among entities at various scales, from the 'doubling of Man' or the 'will divided against itself' of micropolitical struggles to the imperialist moments of international relations.¹⁵ Outside the human scale, such processes of individuation based purely on force are present with variations only of degree, for instance, in the sovereignty of a 'dominant male' in a community of sea lions.¹⁶

On the other hand, while the role of force is essential from the perspective of individuation without further qualification, it is only coadjutant in relation to individuation in the mode of subjectivity. Beastly force, or the cut of the decision, individuates the sovereign as such. In general, power as the differential degree of force individuates the dominator and the

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume II*.

¹⁵ The references are to Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, to Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, and to Siba Grovogui, *Sovereigns, Quasi-Sovereigns, and Africans*.

¹⁶ Outside the animal scale, it could also be said to exist among celestial bodies and among atomic particles in complex interactive systems.

dominated, the active and the reactive, the noble and the slave. On this point there is no better guide than Nietzsche. On the more concrete point of the decision making (or individuating) the sovereign rather than the sovereign making the decision, Schmitt's insights are most pertinent.¹⁷ But in such cases one is not dealing with yet with subjects, let alone the political. Schmitt's decision cannot positively aid in a conceptualization of subjectivity, for subjectivity is available to the sovereign in a paradoxical fashion: subjectivity is only a possibility for the non-sovereign sovereign, when the sovereign has been defeated as such and can no longer be sovereign, for the defeated are a priori barred from force. In contrast, Nietzsche can provide positive critical aid, though arguably only through particular readings, such as Deleuze's, which foreground the transformative potential precisely of 'reactive forces.'¹⁸ Force differentials, that is, power, individuate the active and the reactive, the dominant and the dominated, but there is a tradeoff as the former have a more limited range of transformational possibilities than the latter. The dominant, and the most dominant (the sovereign), enjoy embodying a greater force but are barred from subjectivity. The subjected, on the other hand, barred from force, are individuated also by the force that overcomes them, but *may* be individuated, *in an added stage*, as subjects insofar as their domination is transformed *by means other than the force which subjected them in the first place*.¹⁹ When such transformation occurs, there is subjectivity.

Something of this sort might have been present in Nietzsche's mind when he considered, on the one hand, the 'innocence' of 'child-like' character of the 'blonde beast,' and, on the other hand, that the introspective work of the slave may not only result in *ressentiment*, but also in

¹⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*.

¹⁸ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*.

¹⁹ If defeat is followed by a victory which employs the same means as the defeat that preceded it, there is no real transformation, but simply a reordering of things on the same plane. If a force defeats another force, but then the latter attains a favorable differential degree of power and overcomes the former, there is no alteration of the past, but simply a reconfiguration in the present.

greater *depth* of the self, in man becoming a unique sort of animal, an “*interesting animal*.”²⁰

The blonde beast may be admired, with one Nietzsche, for the fullness of its affirmation of the present moment (afforded by the luxury of possessed power). But the blonde beast may also be pitied, if not repulsed, for its one-dimensionality.²¹ With another Nietzsche, the slave, such as Ah Q, may be loved for its many-dimensionality, for profundity of character, for a sort of spiritual nobility in its revaluation of the repugnant as something transformed into something to affirm, for its transformation of a subjected object into something that can transform a ‘no’ into a ‘yes’: an ‘interesting animal,’ a ‘political animal,’ a subject. But even this slave as subject may also be something to detest, and part of Lu Xun certainly did detest him.

Although, in accordance with Nietzschean perspectivism, loving or abhorring an Ah Q will be a probabilistic function of a given perspective, it must be considered for the purposes of a more complete conceptualization that the ‘moral’ effects of subjectivity (or Ah-Qism) are ambivalent or undetermined a priori. There are affirming and nihilistic possibilities in all such Ah-Qist instances of individuation. Dividing and recreating his self, Ah Q’s gesture on the one hand evinces both a mode of creativity and another of self-destruction. This entwining of creation and destruction in this Ah-Qist process parallels the play of subjective aim and objective lure in Whitehead’s philosophy, whereby all concrescences or actual entities come into being and perish with and through one another with varying degrees of involvement. By this process each concrescence attains temporal subjectivity during its formation as an actual entity as well as objective immortality through its destruction or incorporation into the formation of other entities (thus building into what Whitehead calls the organism’s creative advance or, better, the creative

²⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, p. 16.

²¹ There might be a pertinent parallel to draw in relation to Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man*.

adventure or career of each entity within the overall evolution of the universe qua organism).²²

Ah Q's tale is an expression of plasticity, evolution or adventure, of a developing subject who repeatedly encounters the objective resistance of a greater force, of a stronger person or of an overwhelming circumstance. Not only in consonance with Whitehead, but, *mutatis mutandis*, also with Foucault, Marx, Deleuze, or Veblen, this Ah-Qist process can be extended in a broad theorization of creativity of any 'organism,' 'self,' 'society,' 'war machine,' or 'economy.'²³ Insights facilitated by Ah-Qism may also be valuable in reflections on 'problems of history,' memory, and reconciliation at various scales, from tensions in 'autobiographies' to historical conflict among large-scale formations such as nation-states. In such instances in which a creative and affirming mode of forgetting is valuable currency, there indeed something to love in the example of an Ah Q who forgets, forgets past injuries and his own self, and reconstitutes himself (momentarily becoming a subject during that process of reconstitution), resulting in a respite of peace, harmony, or joy grounded on a moment of subjectivity from the 'natural' order of things or the objectivity of force and 'war.'²⁴

Positing that politics only takes place when there is subjectivity consolidates the notion that force, war, and hierarchy (and one of its modes, empire), all of which have captured so much attention and energy from political thinkers and scientists, are not essentially political but only ancillary to the political. Briefly but not inappropriately stated: war is objective and apolitical; peace is subjective and political. The objective is ever-present; the subjective ephemeral. The

²² Whitehead, *Process and Reality*.

²³ This suggestion may make better sense once 'society' is understood in the broad sense which Whitehead attributes to it (encompassing a molecule, a person, a family unit or a gang, a nation, a state, a region, the planet—any 'institution' or 'world').

²⁴ The temporary and contingent character of such respite might evoke the romantic notion of the *occassio*.

former properly lies in the purview of the ethologist, or the classical physicist; the latter in that of the political thinker and scientist, or the quantum physicist.²⁵

There are other perspectives, of course, from which Ah-Qism is largely something to detest. Such a perspective has an example in Lu Xun's modern nationalism, a perspective from which the 'moral' effects of Ah-Qism may be predominantly nihilistic. The story's thread, after all, unravels into Ah Q's bodily demise as he is executed within the revolutionary movement that he, in his grandest attempt to transform his biography into the long prelude of a redeeming (rather than transformative)²⁶ victory, sought to join. Though Lu Xun's feelings toward his Ah Q and persons with Ah-Qist tendencies were ambivalent, there is no doubt, especially with consideration to Lu Xun's political essays, that his presentation of Ah Q is primarily critical.²⁷ Undoubtedly, as Feng Xuefeng argues, qua political text one of the story's main intents was to symbolize a vision of Chinese history as a series of upheavals and subjections by invading groups and foreign powers, a series that is masked, in a large-scale collective Ah-Qist process.²⁸ The chain of guilt begins with the self-aggrandizement of subjugated domestic elites and continues down the line of oppression of the great masses of the people, who then absorb that oppression and, when they can, pass it further down to the weakest peer or, in the last instance, to the weakest part of themselves. Therefore, Ah Q is ultimately a metaphor for the degradation of the Chinese nation. Such a vision of Chinese national history was seemingly corroborated by the Versailles treaty concessions to Japan, which sparked the May Fourth Movement in 1919.

3. Ah-Qism of the political

²⁵ See Alexander Wendt, "Flatland: Quantum Mind and the International Hologram."

²⁶ Section 4 below, dealing in more detail with Ah Q's relation to revolution, makes a distinction between a political victory that *transforms* the past, and an apolitical or revolutionary victory that may *redeem* the past.

²⁷ See Julia Lovell's "Introduction" to the Penguin Books edition.

²⁸ Feng Xuefeng, "On 'The True Story of Ah Q.'"

As a purely critical concept, Ah-Qism could be mobilized in similar fashion to other histories in different eras and geographical locations. It would not be hard to find examples of Ah-Qist processes at the level of the individual and society, international or otherwise, in the literary, ethnographical, and historical written and oral archives of a given community, since the story of the foundation and endurance of a community is almost invariably the story of the victory of one group and thus the defeat of another. The field of international relations as a whole can be embraced in such an effort, and postcolonialism could be characterized in general as a critical attempt to grasp Ah-Qism by many other names. In this section, however, I suggest that the value of Ah-Qism may be even greater than just that of a historically pertinent concept if it turns out to be part of the ‘essence-like’ core of the political.

In very general terms, this suggestion finds encouragement already from the common notion that politics invariably involves processes of victory and defeat. The pursuit of victory and the possibility of failure have a relation to all interaction traditionally called ‘political.’ This can be taken for granted, more concretely through a philosophy of difference, when the conditions of possibility for politics are given by a dynamic site of difference, that is, an instance of different forces of various kinds (organic, geological, cultural, economic, social, and so on) confronting one another. Since difference of ‘power’ is fundamental to individuation (as developed in the previous section), outcomes of contests among forces do not allow absolute equalization but only temporary equilibrations among forces that remain different and differently different in their ongoing encounters.

The differential degree among forces is the measure of power, and for this reason it indeed would be unreasonable to completely ignore considerations of power when discussing politics. Hence why there are many lines of thought in which politics is, as science and as

practice respectively, the study and management of power distribution. Weber's discussion of this topic is arguably the most lucid classical example.²⁹ However, though invariably *connected* to politics, contest among forces and the possibilities of defeat and victory among them are not enough to give substance to political processes. After all, forces meeting each other, some overcoming the others, is precisely what happens between the micro-organisms that make fermented products like wine or soy sauce possible; yet the idea of organic fermentation as a political process is unlikely (or, at least, our mechanical understanding of such processes limits our ability to call them political outside of jest). If politics were nothing more than power relations, politics would be only a subset of ethology, pertaining to all animal societies, human and non-human, in which there is, for instance, a pecking order, or in which an 'alpha male' subjects most others and monopolizes access to mating partners and resources. Furthermore, ethology would in turn be a subset of mechanics, and the intellectually-compelled result would be to posit that *everything*, the objectivity of the universe, is always and everywhere political.³⁰

But the stasis and change of a given distribution of power, even its monopoly, is not enough to constitute the political. On this point Weber was correct, and approaches but ultimately departs from my reinterpretation of the political inspired by Ah Q. In this section, I will examine the conceptualization of politics that Weber presents in *Politics as a Vocation* under the light of the insights afforded by Ah-Qism in order to show how even his classic notion of politics shifts close to and then away from my reinterpretation of the political. Weber is a contributor to the fact that there continues to be a rightful separation of politics from ethology, or why, perhaps better, politics is a 'species' of the 'genus' of ethology with a certain component—legitimacy—as its 'differentia.' For it to be more than an ethological distribution of power, the

²⁹ Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*.

³⁰ Perhaps with the exception of quantum phenomena, though in its 'rebelliousness' to mechanical laws they would also have a hard time escaping from the gravity of the all-political.

monopoly over violence or force must be ‘legitimate.’ More specifically, this ‘monopoly’ must be pluralistically legitimate; that is, the monopoly must not be self-legitimated, or legitimated ipso facto, by the fact that there is a force which sustains it materially.³¹

It is correct that legitimacy is fundamental to politics, precisely because legitimacy involves Ah-Qist moments, that is, instances in which dominated persons transform the domination to which they are subjects (they thus emerge from the bottom as *subjects*) into a ‘victory,’ into something legitimate, or at the very least potentially legitimate. For what I call Ah-Qist moments Weber uses the expression of “inner justifications,” of which Weber typifies three manifestations centered respectively on tradition, charisma, and legality (78–9). Weber also discusses, along with “inner justifications”, the “external means” upon which domination rests (78). But these ‘external means’ are either part of the mechanical operations of force and thus their role in legitimation is self-preserving or automatic (self-legitimizing), or they are related to the intersubjectivity of material reward and social honor, both of which are not exclusive to human-political relations but observable also in non-human ethological relations.³² Force, the application of the physical blow, is itself part of the ‘conditioning’ of conduct to obedience whose level of achievement correlates with the level of the rationalization of such conditioning (80), which is another way of referring to the disciplinary processes examined by Foucault.³³ Thus, the ‘essence-like’ core of politics must not be sought in these ‘external means’ but in the ‘inner justifications’ of their legitimacy.

Though Weber ultimately advances his conceptualization of politics in a direction which my Ah-Qist one will oppose, there is still consonance among the two in regard to the limits of

³¹ Otherwise, all exercise of force over a weaker entity would be legitimate automatically.

³² As anyone who has been in persistent contact with domesticated animals can attest, high-grade species frequently show an estimation for intangible, social, or status-enhancing gestures. For detailed accounts of these behavioral tendencies in animals, see Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*.

³³ The most direct reference is, of course, Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*.

legitimacy and consequently of the political. From Weber's conceptualization it is possible to identify the limits of legitimacy by considering the type of 'professional politicians' predominant in a given distribution of power. The 'pure types' of professional politicians are a function of wealth and occupation. On one extreme, there are the wealthy rentiers (recipients of 'unearned income') that can afford to dedicate their time to 'political' activity, and who, given that they have materially benefitted from the given status quo, tend to be conservative. On the other end, there are the 'propertyless' politicians among whom almost exclusively is found "reckless and unreserved political idealism" proper to "extraordinary and hence revolutionary epochs" (86). When the former type dominates 'politics' the distribution of power takes the form of a plutocracy; in the less common case in which the latter, against most odds, succeed in 'politics' the distribution undergoes a revolution and then settles in a (formally, at least) different distribution. Over time, the old revolutionaries tend to become the new conservatives of a new order.

A few supplementations to Weber's conceptualization are pertinent regarding the corresponding limits of the legitimacy of the plutocratic and revolutionary orders. The legitimacy of a revolutionary 'order' (which is only worthy of the revolutionary appellative during the transformation of order and not after), or of a revolutionary politician more concretely, cannot by definition depend on legality, and it is unlikely to be based on tradition. Only charisma is left for the 'inner justifications' that are likely to legitimate revolutionary 'politics.' But the very nature of revolution—and, following Arendt, its inevitable disillusion—only offers two possibilities for charisma: its eventual liquidation or its 'dead life' artificially extended through 'cults of personality.'³⁴ Plutocracy, in turn, marks the limits of legitimacy in a different sense, for a plutocracy in general is bound to exhaust its legitimacy, though there may be some cyclicity to

³⁴ See Arendt, "The Revolutionary Tradition and Its Lost Treasure."

the ‘eternal return’ of wealth-legitimizing ideologies.³⁵ In any case, since no ideology can stand by itself forever but must avail itself of material sustenance, an enduring plutocracy must mean both an expansion of wealth dispossession and accumulation together with greater reliance on the ‘external means’ of power.³⁶ In other words, an enduring plutocracy entails empire. There is indeed no empire in history worthy of the name which was not at the same time the extension of a plutocracy.³⁷ What this brief supplementary discussion shows is that the limits of legitimacy identifiable in Weber’s conceptualization of politics facilitate a visualization of the limits of the political and, consequently, an approximation to the core of the political.

Both empire and revolution lie at the limits of the political, at the edge where legitimation tapers out. It can be imagined that an individual or a community would be thoroughly imperialized when there remain no avenues of plasticity that allow a transformation of imperial domination into some form of spiritual victory. The result would be a proper ‘imperial subject,’ which would be no more than a pure imperial object, a mere object of domination and extraction. The ‘imperial moment’ would thus stand in diametrical opposition to a moment of subjectivity, forestalling the possibility of a ‘polis’—understood in the most encompassing manner to include the ‘polis’ of a person’s spirit, or actual aggregations of human specimens in a distributional organization.

This point underscore how the limit of subjectivity represented by empire is also the limit of the political, and thus the point also shows how subjectivity, as characterized in the previous sections through Ah-Qism, is in fact at the core of any moment that warrants the appellation of

³⁵ There seems to be a peculiar endurance to the formalist ‘inner justification’ that is the ‘liberal creed,’ as Polanyi called it in his *Great Transformation*, or what is more commonly called today ‘neoliberalism.’ On the cyclicity of the force of economic liberal ideology, see Mark Blyth’s *Great Transformations*.

³⁶ On this point see David Harvey’s *The New Imperialism*.

³⁷ It might also be instructive to make note of the relation of the legacy of Roman jurisprudence (“the product of a political structure arising from the city state to world domination”) to state rationalization. Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, 93.

‘political.’ If Aristotle’s definition of humans as ‘political animals’ is to have any substance, then the political character of the ‘polis’ must not depend on the material, economical, or purely distributive and hierarchical elements of such sophisticated yet definitionally non-political animal communities as are beehives (though I leave open the possibility that future ethological knowledge will compel an acknowledgement of politics among non-human animals and thus the death of Aristotle’s definition).³⁸ Plato is indeed close to the mark insofar as he focuses on the *transformative* potential afforded to citizens by the polis.³⁹ But the fact is that this element of the polis, as central as it is, does not exist in a vacuum but in the reality of differential attributes among ‘citizens.’ Ah Q and the idlers are indeed ‘fellow citizens,’ or rather fellow villagers, but they can never be equal, and their power relations materialize in Ah Q’s customary subjections. However, they also afford to each other, in their own Ah-Qist moments, the opportunity to become subjects as they transform the inevitability of subjection into instances of ‘happy intoxication.’ As there is indeed no escape from structures of power and domination, which Foucault has shown perhaps irrefutably, from an ethical perspective the brief Ah-Qist respite offered by moments of politics must be positively evaluated, perhaps even abstractly or at least, likely, in most actual instances after the fact. More importantly, it ought to be clearer now that it is after subjection that politics—that is, subjectivity in a ‘polis’—takes place.

With this insight, in full agreement with Arendt, politics can finally be defined as the (eventual or episodic) transformation of *zoe* into *bios*.⁴⁰ The bulk of human experience, from day to day, is an animal way of being an organism.⁴¹ Among that bulk there are modest and brief flashes, charged with uncertain effects, of a *unique way of being* an organism which up to this

³⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*.

³⁹ Plato, *Republic*. The transformative potential of the polis is also what Derrida examines in terms of ‘friendship’. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*.

⁴⁰ Arendt, “The Concept of History.”

⁴¹ With the exception of a habitual Ah-Qism, all quotidian activities are of an animalistic character.

point has only been observed in humans: subjectivity, biography, a life with a *history*. This insight, in turn, confirms that it is the transformation of subjection into a moment of subjectivity that lies at the core of the political. It also consolidates, at the limit, that there is a type of subjection which ‘crowds out’ the possibility of subjectivity, at least ‘in theory.’ Such sort of subjection is that of empire. Empire is therefore the expression of a ‘satanic mill’ that liquidates politics.⁴²

Revolution likewise exhausts politics, but since Ah Q is ‘barred from the revolution,’ I will examine subjectivity and revolution with some specificity as I return to Lu Xun’s text in the following section. For now, suffice it to postulate that conceptually there are two apolitical purities, two purities of force and subjection: revolution, the purity of force that is in flux, and empire, the purity of force in stasis. Empirically, of course, there are only probabilistic mixes of these conceptual purities, such that there is always at least the thinnest of chances for subjectivity and politics, and the practical concern is then to measure and, if possible, further open up that ‘strait gate’ through which the subjectivity and politics might enter.⁴³

This supplementary discussion of the limits of legitimacy and of politics has perhaps exaggerated the degree to which Weber approaches my own reinterpretation of the political. It is time to confront the point at which Weber and I decidedly part ways regarding the political. From the foregoing discussion it is clear that, informed by Ah-Qism, it is not possible to consider the imperialist (plutocrat) and the revolutionary as political agents, though Weber insists in calling them politicians. Who is then a political agent? Clearly, it is Ah Q, and only during his Ah-Qist moments. But in Weber’s own terms the political agent would more likely be someone

⁴² The reference is, of course, to Polanyi. The reference is far from purely rhetorical, for the relation posited here between plutocracy and empire has parallels with Polanyi’s discussion of ‘market society’ and colonial encounters. See Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, in particular chapters 12 and 13.

⁴³ The reader is likely to tell that the reference is to Benjamin’s messianism. See Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” p. 264.

who he does not consider to be a politician at all: the civil servant. For Weber, the civil servant only executes or administers, the politician *fights*. Can fighting be the defining political act? No, though it may be, competing with seduction and sexual intercourse, the defining ethological act. Once again: the political is not centrally the friend/enemy distinction that obsessed Schmitt, though of course the political could not exist without it. Force, or the fight that expresses it, is a condition of politics. The essence of the political emerges at the aftermath of fight, or rather within the plasticity of the denouements of fight. However, again perhaps with some exaggeration, in spite of Weber's privileging of fighting and his banishment of the civil servant from the political, there is another moment in his thought which shifts him back to a high degree of harmony with my reinterpretation of the political. In examining the motivational factors for the civil servant, Weber shows how crucial this agent is for legitimacy and the maintenance of the 'political' order:

The honor of the civil servant is vested in his ability to execute conscientiously the order of the superior authorities, *exactly as if the order agreed with his own conviction*. This holds even if the order appears wrong to him and if, despite the civil servant's remonstrances, the authority insists on the order. *Without this moral discipline and self-denial*, in the highest sense, the whole apparatus would fall to pieces (95, my italics).

In an unexpected twist, there is this moment in Weber's conceptualization whereby legitimacy resides not in the political leader insofar as he is 'victorious' after doing the fighting, that is, on the side of the given order, but in the self-denial or, better, the transformation of victory into defeat, of the 'heads and hands' of the state. The 'everyday' of administration, which to Weber seems neutral or "impartial administration" seemingly "without scorn and bias" (93), is in fact the intimate site of the political. It could be said that this (potentially) political aspect of

bureaucracy explains the rightful interest of political thinkers in Kafka's works. In any case, there is yet another moment in Weber's argument that betrays his explicit conceptualization of politics. As a mode of being or way of life, for Weber politics bears "a *feeling of power*" as its most direct product (115, my italics). Weber discusses the activation of this feeling even in the case of politicians "placed in formally modest positions" (115). I push these points further toward their limit: First, the feeling (a process simultaneously spiritual and bodily) of power—rather than power itself, its 'possession,' or 'exercise'—is what lies closer to the core of the political. Second, it is precisely in the case of modest actors, of agents *placed* in a situation of modesty, where by the effect of contrast or transformation, the feeling of power (and feeling alone, without actual power) is more intense. Modesty has its roots in a 'defeat', for modesty is a modulation of meekness, humiliation, or subjection.

The previous points exhaust the moments in which Weber and I may hold hands, as his dominant line of thought about politics shifts back to the foreground when he considers the 'decisive psychology' of the political actor in contrast to the merely bureaucratic one:

This is the decisive psychological quality of the politician: his ability to let realities work upon him with inner concentration and calmness. Hence his *distance* to things and men. 'Lack of distance' *per se* is one of the deadly sins of every politician (115, italics in the original).⁴⁴

At this point Weber and I move in diametrically opposed ways, at last. Insofar as a person is a subject that person may be a politician, and indeed this political subjectivity or condition comes about as an absorption and transformation of a reality pressed upon the objectivity of the person.

The result of this process may be calmness, a sense of dignity, nobility, elevation, and even

⁴⁴ It could be considered that Weber is providing a normative characterization of the politician, whereas my intent is to grasp a descriptive characterization of the necessarily 'occasional' politician (and one might once again recall the *occassio* in political romanticism).

jollity and intoxication, as illustrated by Ah Q. Yet such result is not brought about by means of a distance with the objective forces that press upon and mold the subject, but rather by that very pressing, the blows inflicted by reality, and the transformation of those blows into the subject's intimate victory. It is not a distance but a 'nearness,' in Heidegger's sense of the term, which discloses the subjectivity of the political agent.⁴⁵ An intimacy, stemming from violence but temporarily clearing itself from it, mediates the forces of 'things and men. Such intimacy mediates the subjectivity of the 'politician' that comes into being and fades away in the careers of regions, nations, and persons both in their 'world-historical' and in their quotidian (micro-historical) encounters. It may turn out that romanticism holds a crucial promise for political thought, for the intimacy or nearness that shapes the consistency of a subject qua political agent is the '*occassio*' of politics, which dissipates into the various ethological processes of power, as a matter of fact, when such qualities as responsibility and proportion, which are so important for Weber, become predominant in activity.⁴⁶ Weber desires the activity of the politician to be 'objective' rather than "purely personal self-intoxication" (116). However, as I have argued, insofar as activity is political it precisely is—though not 'purely'—self-intoxication. If self-intoxication is a "sin" for an 'Apollonian' Weber, then politics is not virtuous but sinful. Furthermore, it is this sinful, Dionysian condition which highlights, borrowing Weber's words, the "tragedy with which all action, but especially political action, is truly interwoven" (117).⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Martin Heidegger, "The Thing."

⁴⁶ On the other hand, there is a responsiveness and a proportionality to Ah-Qism. Ah Q's transformation from 'insect' to 'the utmost' does evince a form of proportionality, but the fact that a transformation takes place simultaneously violates the proportionality from which transformation stems. On political romanticism and the *occassio*, see Schmitt's own critical writings on the matter, which in another place I have argued that in fact save political romanticism against Schmitt's purported intention. Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*.

⁴⁷ Tellingly, it seems from what follows this quoted passage that for Weber the 'tragic' character of action means what for Arendt is the 'futility' of action. It would not be at all outlandish to suggest a contradiction within Weber's thought between this point on the tragedy of action thus conceived and his subsequent exaltation of an 'ethic of responsibility' "in which case one has to give an account of the foreseeable results of one's action" (120). On the futility of action, see Arendt, "Work, Labor, Action," p. 180.

Lest the argument become too redundant, suffice it to say that the ‘ethic’, ‘legitimation’, or ‘guilt’ that Weber derides, both in the struggles between romantic partners as well as among states engaged in war, is the concrescence of politics; whereas the ‘manly’, ‘chivalrous’ ‘objectivity’ turned toward the *future*, which he desires in politics, is in fact a limit or end of politics, for the political is backward-looking, *oriented to the past*. If an ‘unconcerned’ objective state of affairs—in which material interests are coolly, detachedly, coherently, and rationally calculated among contending forces—is to be called, with Weber, ‘manly’, then it turns out that politics, and subjectivity with it, would be ‘feminine’—or, borrowing the notion from Deleuze and Guattari, politics would be the ‘becoming-woman’ of force.⁴⁸

Having finally parted ways definitively with Weber, there is one last point where his gaze and mine meet from a distance, perhaps with less exaggeration. Weber closes his reflection on politics by imagining the political subject as a sober hero, a hero who, as Weber desires, “shall not crumble when the world from his point of view is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer” (128). Weber is again being Apollonian with his desire of sobriety, whereas my Dionysian visualization of the political subject foregrounds the moments of intoxication in the becoming political subject of a person or a conglomerate of persons. But the ‘heroic’ aspect of the political agent ought to be retained in either case. And then it turns out that it is not the world which is stupid, for the world is the organic unfolding of forces that it has always been. If there is stupidity it is in the subject subjected by the world. Like inebriated stupidity, a ‘becoming political’ is an emotional temporary instance that may be cherished, though it may also bring sorrow in its wake. The political subject is, more precisely, a stupid hero, like our Ah Q.

⁴⁸ See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, and *What is Philosophy?* For Weber, the essence of politics is then ‘unconcern’ and ‘unconditionality’, like the unconditionality of ‘turning the other cheek’ in the Gospel (119). Again, in contradistinction, the political in my reinterpretation is in fact linked to conditionality, conditionality as subjection under greater forces.

4. *Ah-Qism, revolution, and fantasy*

As a revolutionary, Lu Xun may be another example of a stupid hero. Lu Xun hoped to liberate the Chinese people from a vicious chain of oppression. Revolution indeed occurred in China, and it was followed by victories, defeats, and their transformations as experienced differently by individuals and groups in the country—not to speak of its effects elsewhere as an event of world-historical import. But whatever occurred was political *only* to the extent that meanings and facts following the revolution were reevaluated as victories pertaining to the Chinese qua subjects. This aspiration, in spite of differences, Lu Xun had in common with the communists. Thus in 1953 Feng Xuefeng, with the fire of the Communist Revolution behind his back, writes:

Now Ah Q and Ah-Qism have passed away for good, thanks to the victory of the people's revolution led by the proletariat; but Lu Hsun's contribution to the revolution and his masterpieces will shine forever in the history of our people and of Chinese literature (110).

If revolution brought an end to Ah-Qism, however, consequently new configurations of power branched out in various directions after the revolution, and new Ah-Qisms had to take place, and these in turn opened up venues for other revolutions in thought and practice, for better or worse (especially in the construction and management of markets after the Deng Xiaoping era reforms), and thus contemporary China is marked by the likelihood of Ah-Qisms typical of late capitalist societies.⁴⁹ This 'revolutionary' path of the Chinese nation-state is hardly what the revolutionary Lu Xun desired.⁵⁰ Such sort of 'political' development ought to surprise no follower of Arendt,

⁴⁹ An illustrative ethnological example may be found in Aihwa Ong's *Neoliberalism as Exception*.

⁵⁰ Neither was it probably what the original communist revolutionaries that followed had in mind. The communists did not have an easy time fitting Lu Xun, who never joined the communist party, into their pantheon for the People's Republic. Yet in spite of ideological differences, it is clear that Lu Xun shared with the communists a utopian desire to liberate the people once and for all from power relations, that is, from any sort of objective condition that propitiates Ah-Qism.

and in fact it might not surprise Lu Xun either if he could see the evolution of his nationalist revolution. As a 'stupid hero' he desired national liberation, though in his fiction he also envisaged the futility incipient in any revolution. Lu Xun, as I read his *Story*, worked through this contradiction in his presentation of the revolution creeping from neighboring towns toward Ah Q's village.

In the *Story*, once the 'revolutionaries' can no longer be repelled or executed by the authorities in place, even the most prominent figures in Ah Q's village are filled with terror, which brings joy to Ah Q and makes him dream of revolution:

"Revolution is not a bad thing," thought Ah Q. "Put an end to all these bastards . . . they are too despicable, too detestable! . . . I would like to go over to the revolutionaries myself" (59).

Ah Q briefly enjoys a small taste of revolutionary power when, in drunken excitement, he is overheard yelling the word 'rebellion,' which leads many villagers to fear that he has joined the revolution, causing them to adopt deferential behavior toward him.

That evening the old man in charge of the temple was also unexpectedly friendly and offered him tea; then Ah Q asked him for two flat cakes, and after eating these demanded a four ounce candle that had been used, and a candlestick. He lit the candle and lay down alone in his little room. He felt inexpressibly refreshed and happy, while the candlelight leapt and flickered as on the Lantern Festival and his imagination too seemed to rear.

"Revolt? It would be fun. . . . A group of revolutionaries would come, all wearing white helmets and white armour, carrying swords, steel maces, bombs, foreign guns, double-edged knives with sharp points and spears with hooks. They would come to the

Tutelary God's Temple and call out, 'Ah Q! Come with us, come with us!' And then I would go with them. . . .

"Then all those villagers would be in a laughable plight, kneeling down and pleading, 'Ah Q, spare our lives.' But who would listen to them! [...]" (61–2).

Ah Q goes on to fantasize about the discharge of power that the new order would make available to him. The members of the village's prominent families, the Chao (Zhao) and the Chien (Qian), also sense the impending change in the order of things, and they decide to let go of past rivalries and shift their positions in accordance with the changing winds.

The successful county candidate in the Chao family got news quickly, and as soon as he heard that the revolutionaries had entered the town that night, he had immediately wound his pigtail up on his head and gone out first thing to call on the Imitation Foreign Devil in the Chien family, with whom he had never been on good terms. This was a time for "all to work for reforms," so they had a very pleasant talk and became on the spot congenial comrades pledging themselves to become revolutionaries (65).

Besides the pettiness of revenge that revolution represents for Ah Q, Lu Xun also depicts the pettiness of 'actually existing' revolutionary practices as carried out by those with the means to act. So the scene of the Chao and the Chien continues:

After racking their brains for some time, they remembered that in the Convent of Quiet Self-improvement was an imperial tablet inscribed "Long live the Emperor" which ought to be done away with at once. Thereupon they lost no time in going to the convent to carry out their revolutionary activities (65).

The daily lives of the common people change little, if at all, during the revolution. Change is limited to the wounding of pigtails. What is more, the 'actual' revolutionaries are no better, for

they appear merely as rows of robber ants, carrying away valuable goods from wealthy households. Such ‘unleashing of force’ was still an object of desire for Ah Q, yet when he observes the revolutionaries his body does not comply with his desire to join them:

[...]; he also looked carefully and thought he could see a lot of men in white helmets and white armour, carrying off cases, carrying off furniture, even carrying off the Ningpo bed of the successful county candidate’s wife; however, he could not see them very clearly. He wanted to go nearer, but his feet were rooted to the ground (75).

Ah Q is awestruck. He had earlier fantasized about taking that Ningpo bed for himself as a revolutionary. Yet when he actually had the chance to join the revolution, his body refused to move in accordance. Later, Ah Q grows resentful of the men in white helmets for not coming to call him, and goes on to fantasize about becoming an informant and taking revenge on the revolutionaries who ignored him.

Such ‘cowardly’ sort of Ah Q is undoubtedly the one that the revolutionary Lu Xun must have detested the most, but as a student of the human condition Lu Xun depicts something more profound with this Ah Q. From the perspective of the first Lu Xun, the revolutionaries are not part of ‘true’ revolution, but mere operators of a new hierarchy. Not far below are the opportunists who feign to be revolutionaries through petty activities. In the most removed and pitiable instance there are those, like Ah Q, who can do nothing but simply fantasize about being high within the new hierarchy. Together, for the first Lu Xun, they give rise to a collective Ah-Qism that perpetuates hierarchy. In his own moment of fantasy, Lu Xun desires liberation from the chain of hierarchies: this alone would be ‘true’ revolution. For the second Lu Xun, however, the impossibility of this fantasy must be apparent. It is not Ah Q’s Ah-Qism which ultimately prevents him from joining the ‘revolution,’ but a passivity inherent to his bodily constitution.

Experience shows that most persons are like Ah Q, finding themselves paralyzed when witnessing radical events. It is conventionally assumed in political thought that all persons are indistinctly capable of making ‘political’ choices in all events, and thus ‘action’ becomes an object of admiration whereas passivity one of scorn. If ‘true’ revolution were to occur, Ah Q would be all the more likely to fail to join, and thus he would rightfully deserve even greater disapproval. Yet it is the case that there are too many bodily constitutions, if not comprising the ‘bulk of humanity,’ which are more predisposed to passivity and to fantasy than to the ‘action’ that revolution of any sort demands. Nevertheless, as postulated in the previous section, revolution (a purity of power in flux) is a limit for the political. Consequently, those ‘ill-equipped’ to take part in revolution are likely to be the ‘nearest’ to the political. The ordering of closeness to ‘true’ revolution by the first Lu Xun must be reversed in the ordering of nearness to the political.

From this reversal it should not be concluded, however, that fantasy is by necessity political. In fact, fantasy alone is not political and is closer in design to revolution. The two might in fact be equivalent at the level of the spirit: fantasy is imagined revolution. Historically, revolution is always failed fantasy. But unlike actualized revolution, the ‘fantasy-stage’ of revolution (which is the motivational factor of ‘the revolutionary Lu Xun’) may have access to subjectivity and thus to the political. However, for ‘political fantasy’ Ah Q can only be stand as an example negatively, for his revolutionary fantasy corresponds too directly to actualized revolution. In other words, his fantasy is too obsessed with revenge in the future rather than with transformation of the past. He only fantasizes about getting even with his enemies. But revenge is inherently apolitical since it takes past wrongs as they were and instead of transforming them it ‘redeems’ them with a shift in the order of things, in the distribution of power. There is no Ah-

Qism in the fantasizing, revengeful Ah Q. As a result, Ah Q does not obtain the momentary peace of mind that his previous Ah-Qist victories afforded him. Fantasy of revenge is not satisfying; it leaves Ah Q angry and uneasy, increasingly resentful as the fantasy presses itself over him through its lack of realization. Fantasy that lacks the effect of transforming the past into something *momentarily satisfying in itself* is therefore apolitical and unsatisfying, more conducive to ‘ressentiment.’ A political fantasy would be political insofar as it succeeds not in redeeming but in transforming the past, such that satisfaction obtains *ipso facto* instead of being *deferred indefinitely to the ‘eventual’ point of its actualization.*⁵¹ With this insight it follows that the temporary *cathartic aspect* of fantasy provides its link to the political, whereas its *aspirational aspect* removes it from the political. Ditto for the ‘fantasy-dimension’ alone of revolution.

5. Concluding remarks

Before leaving this world, Ah Q experiences one last instance of ‘spiritual victory,’ that is, of subjectivity, of *bios*. Arrested randomly by the revolutionaries to serve as a ‘public example’ to deter robbery (!), Ah Q is forced to sign what is, unbeknownst to him, a confession. Being illiterate, he is asked to draw a circle as his signature. Feeling that his reputation depended on drawing the circle well, he tries his earnest to make it round, but his trembling hand fails him. He is promptly taken back to imprisonment.

[...] he did not feel particularly irritated. He supposed that in this world it was the fate of everybody at some time to be dragged in and out of prison, and to have to draw circles on paper; it was only because his circle had not been round that he felt a blot on his escutcheon. However,

⁵¹ If one posits that Lu Xun’s liberational fantasy is itself an Ah-Qist fantasy, that is, if for a brief moment he became a subject and obtained satisfaction while writing the *Story*, then Lu Xun himself could provide a positive example of political fantasy.

presently he regained composure, thinking to himself, "Only idiots can make perfect circles." And with this thought he fell asleep (82).

Such is the account of Ah Q's last victory, his last moment of *bios*.⁵² Afterwards, Ah Q's last moments are a return to *zoe*. The next day he is carried off for execution, being paraded around town for an animalistic crowd to admire full of apprehension, curiosity, and desire for entertainment. The story ends with a depiction of the crowd's gaze being more terrible than the "fierce yet cowardly" eyes of a wolf that Ah Q had encountered in the past: "dull yet penetrating eyes that seemed to have devoured his words and to be still eager to devour something beyond his flesh and blood. [...] These eyes seemed to have joined in one, already biting into his soul" (86). The crowd is ultimately disappointed with the low level of entertainment that the silent Ah Q provided in his last moments. Such is the normal order of things in zoological behavior and interaction: survival, aggression, passivity, boredom peppered with moments of entertainment. These things must be part of all zoological experience. But Ah Q illustrates those brief and exceptional instances in which a unique form of experience occurs.

In my reading, much more than an allegory of national failure, and more than an account of the futility of revolution and of the zoological character of human life, the *Story* represents Ah Q's *biography* in the most 'true' sense of the word. When the narrator struggles in his introduction with how to call his work, he nevertheless is clear that the core of his writing will be Ah Q's biography, some sort of biography. It turns out to be the 'true' biography, 'true' because it recounts the 'modest' yet profound instances of *bios* in Ah Q's career in this world, the moments in which the past is transformed from defeat into victory. Such is the only sort of victory deserving of being called a political victory. Defeated by greater forces, Ah Q lives in the sense of *zoe*, but the forgetting and transformation of past defeat is his *bios*, his biography, his

⁵² And, it could be added, a last instance for Ah Q of '*amor fati*.'

‘true’ story, his individuation as a subject. Ah-Qism is a concept for the processes through which the subjections human animals experience as bodied entities can become political.

This reinterpretation of the political is not meant, however, to celebrate *in abstracto* the political, or the Ah-Qisms that represent its brief instantiations. An evaluation of the political or of Ah-Qism can only be carried out in concrete contexts, determining to what degree, and from what perspective, it operates mostly in affirming or mostly in nihilistic fashion. This evaluation then becomes the empirical task of the student of politics. In this conceptual piece, however, I have only intended to show, with the help of Ah Q, that the political is a sort of experience that is very infrequent and ephemeral relative to the great experiential bulk that is a person’s and a community’s zoological way of being. The political is thus both insignificant and profound. Though almost negligible among the expanse of a person’s zoology, the political is *everything* for a person’s biography.

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