Jean-Luc Nancy – A Negative Politics?

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It seems that one of the most central problems of political philosophy is the relation of subjects to their community – while one can hardly think of that community in terms of a meta- or mega-subject, the question of which status one is to attribute to it remains, i.e. what exactly it is, how it is being constituted, what effects it has on the individual subjects. The route commonly taken to explore that relation is to examine the – supposedly – constitutive role which community plays for the individual subjects. Insofar as one assumes that it is in fact a *constitutive* role, this role can consist either in an originary *constitution* of individual identities by the community or in the essential and irreducible *transformation* of those identities, where the latter could still be constituted extra- or prepolitically. The argument then focuses on a concrete model of this process, and in fact mostly on the respective shares and eventual priorities of individual and collective contributions, maybe additionally on the relation between politics and law. Obviously (and in my eyes quite rightfully), the *polis* can hardly be eliminated from the core of political discourse or of philosophical discourse about politics.

For about 20 years, Jean-Luc Nancy has presented a whole series of works that reflect on this irreducibility while demonstrating that this reflection can and must be intertwined with an elaboration of the problematic of the concept of 'community'. In what follows, I will try to present Nancy's argument, which pushes the logic of a certain critique of community (namely that of a critique of totalitarianism) to an ontological radicalization that finally engenders a critical reflection even of

democracy. However, my aim is to also show – against a common interpretation of Nancy – that there remains more than just a turning away from politics and from the political, and probably even more than a merely negative politics.[1] After having drawn the main lines of Nancy's community-skeptical argument and having confronted it with a critique that asks for potential consequences resulting for political actors (I), I am going to examine a couple of Nancy's more recent texts[2] and see if they contain any precisions, extensions or revisions in comparison with the analysis up to that point. I will proceed by first specifying the 'negative politics' up to the point of asking if it is maybe even an 'anti-politics' that Nancy suggests, and then explaining the transition from an ontology of being-with to a 'theory of communicative *praxis'* as I would like to provisionally call it (II). In the last part of this essay I am going to pursue what could be a 'rehabilitation of politics' and discuss how that could be thought and connected to the previous analysis (III). I am going to argue that in the end, Nancy will have us provided with two strands of argument that are promising, but remain to be elaborated: On the one hand, a detailed conception of communication will have been presented, the political consequences of which need to be worked out, on the other hand, we will see a more 'properly' political conception of democracy that is centered around justice, but which still remains all too superficial.

I

For a start, I understand Nancy's argument as criticizing a thought that sees politics as a form or an expression of an identity. Such a thought understands (at least essential moments of) politics as concerning the relation between some collective

form of life of a group of individuals and their practical-political judgment, the latter having its condition of possibility or at least of intelligibility in the context of those collective convictions and practices. Insofar as the individual decisions and judgments thus reflect their communal context, any concrete decision or judgment is a more or less direct expression of common judgments, values and convictions, the individual expression of the community. That might not yet mean that there is an *identity* or even a *subsumption* of individual and community, but there is definitely something going on that can be described as expression, (re-)presentation or embodiment of a (collective) identity by means of another (individual) entity or identity. In most of the discussion, then, it is not the concept of collective identity as such that seems at issue, but rather the exact properties of that 'expression'.

Nancy's critique on the other hand can show that such a shift of focus from the individual to the community tends towards a model of identity politics that both has to exclude individual particularities (especially those that are perceived as being in conflict with the supposed collective *ethos*), at least in the form of a social sanctioning of non-virtuous moments, and to maintain itself only by emphasizing its boundaries, i.e. by negating other identities or communities. The latter aspect finds a radicalization in theories that presuppose a necessity of 'inventing' an exterior foe, the former in a model that Nancy calls the 'work' (*œuvre*) of the community or 'community-as-work'. For this model, the supposition of a (to-be-expressed) identity immanent to the community leads to the political project of unfolding that identity, that is to say to the appeal addressed to the community and to its members of putting this identity to work, of expressing it as free from distortions as possible and of realizing, producing it in the world – eventually even by eliminating and 'cleaning out' those moments that are strangers to this identity in each of its concretizations.

Politics then becomes a matter 'of discovering the immanent or implicit identity of a group and setting it to work, drawing it out and allowing it to express itself in functional activity' as Norris points out.[3] As far as this critique of real or virtual exclusion and repression is concerned, the question of whether this common identity is understood as being natural and pre-given or as being laid in the hands of the community itself which would have to politically invent and institute it, is secondary. Both of these understandings contain the germ of totalitarianism.[4] For Nancy, our 'overcoming' of totalitarianism can be a postponement or an enclosure at best, unless we stop confronting it with just another community based on an essential set of values and norms, as much as these may in fact be 'better', i.e. more inclusive, more universal, maybe more procedural values and norms than those on which totalitarian regimes are based. The problem lies in the very concept of a community possessing a certain essence, and it surfaces as soon as one is in some way using this concept (as soon as one tries to strengthen the role of community, to identify with it, to build a political order on it etc.).[5]

Now, Nancy's theory can take a counter-position to such an understanding of the relation of political community and its members *without* having to put forward an atomistic individualism, because it does not take the Hegelian critique of such individualism as its point of departure, but rather the Heideggerian existential analytics. Thus it can suppose that the relations are in a way prior and constitutive to the individual subjects, without having to postulate their *Aufhebung* in a community that would be a subject of a higher order. While under the title of being-in-common[6] this theory confers fundamental (existential) significance to the fact that a lonesome existence and a completely autonomous subject are contradictions in terms, the role that it provides for relationality and plurality is so 'profound' that they are *below* or

prior to every identity, and so *below* or *prior* to a collective identity as well. In fact, they are 'profound' in an absolute sense, withdrawing even from being a foundation for something else.[7] The focus is not on the constitution of identity – maybe following the more or less 'structural' model of a dialectical constitution of identity by the negation of its negation – but on a more or less 'ontological' analysis of that which has to happen so that something can be, can appear, can come into the world in the first place. Or, more specifically: What has to happen so that something – someone – can experience herself as being put 'there' in the world, and maybe 'later' develop an identity or subjectivity? This is being-in-common: *Dasein* is *Da-Sein*, because it is always already exposed – it is just appearing, but this already means appearing for and in front of others. The mutual exposition of beings and the unavailability of that relation (exposition-appearance) is what 'makes' the appearance. That which appears is marked from the outset by its opening to others, or better: that which appears does so, i.e. it *is* by and in that very opening for others. Thus, by this existential being-outside-itself, it is constituted as essentially unessential, dependent, affectable and 'vulnerable'. But the relation of being-exposed is not only unavailable and able to affect or touch the singular appearing being, it is also empty: Neither threat nor coining of some passive, receptive matter or identity, it is nothing but the mere fact that there are several beings near one another, nothing but the empty 'between' between multiple beings. The singular being *is* by openness for others – and these others *are* at the same time, with the same 'move' – but yet they are different.[8] Thus, being is always already *being-with* and the ontological basis of any individuation is a community of sorts, but this community precisely has no identity, no substance, it is not defined by its history, by one or a set of interests, by a

certain language game or by a set of values, convictions and practices, it is the mere fact of the plurality of beings.

But if you confront this ontological analysis with the need of politically dealing with individual *praxis* and its necessary heterogeneous plurality, e.g. by constructing a legislative will and a resulting order of the common, then it becomes manifest that Nancy may have good reasons to criticize the homogeneity and transparency that such a construction presupposes, but that he has little to offer in terms of how to actually deal with political decisions. In fact, Nancy's deconstruction of communal binding powers tends to do away with political projects as such and to understand individual freedom as something that has to be coordinated collectively in the most modest manner possible. While a 'liberal' *ontology* – i.e. the conception of prepolitically constituted individual subjects that negotiate their autonomous interests rationally as soon as they 'enter' a political context – seems to be inadequate, it could turn out that any inference of a political project from an ontology of being-in-common is in fact impossible and ends up being totalitarian, and that in the end a 'liberal' *politics* is the most appropriate one.[9] For a politically interested philosophy this is hardly satisfying, of course:

> This produces a political philosophy that is, however theoretically
> brilliant, strangely removed from the political. [...] To say of decision
> that it is empty, and radically undetermined, makes politics seem
> arbitrary and haphazard – indeed, it may actually encourage it to be so. It
> is true that we cannot appeal to law for the justification of all of our
> judgments. This is why we must take responsibility for them. [...] But it
> does not follow from this that they are radically or completely

"ungrounded", as Nancy claims. It is surely correct to say that "We have to decide on contents and norms." But contents and norms are in a reciprocal relation with judgments: our choices of them are made on the basis of other contents and norms to which we are already committed. Decision is never absolute, for it always presupposes such prior commitments. (Norris, p. 285)

Now Nancy can rightfully claim to see this reciprocity well, to accord great value to the 'a-priori-commitment' that one's mere existence means, and to go at lengths in explaining how it should be understood, and how the obligation of a 'commitment' can be understood in the first place. For this always already accepted, but only 'quasi-normative' commitment of existence implies at least the resistance to take part in the project of a common identity that would suppress our ontologically plural and heterogeneous being-in-common. Additionally, Nancy can point the critic to his effort of clarifying the exact character of responsibility – i.e. what exactly it means that 'we must take responsibility for them' and why we must do so and in the face of whom or what. But when Nancy says (in *The Inoperative Community*) that '"political" would mean a community ordering itself to the unworking of its communication, or destined to this unworking: a community undergoing the experience of its sharing.' (p. 40), then it is patent that such a quasi-normative principle is indeed of a mostly negative character, i.e. that it merely reminds us of the limits of possible reasonable and adequate commitments, but in no way specifies what our positive commitments should be. A maybe even more fundamental difficulty could be if Nancy were to say that the problem of political judgment *as a problem* would only arise in the context of an ambition for autonomy, self-

transparency and self-sufficiency, but also for knowledge and control of the world, an ambition which in itself already conceals the pluralistic flow of appearing and disappearing of fragmentary entities. Then the truly self-conscious 'community' (or better: the 'community' which would truly be 'conscious of being') and its *praxis*, respectively the truly authentic being-in-common would have to be understood in terms of a final overcoming of politics or as an already more or less apolitical *praxis* of radical opening for the occurring and emerging being(s).[10]

II

As a next step, I want to show how a more detailed description of Nancy's arguments, which also makes reference to more recent texts, seems at first to confirm the mentioned concerns, but then opens way for what I provisionally would like to call a 'theory of communicative *praxis*' which provides answers that are, so to say, at an angle to those concerns.

But let us start with the beginning:[11] In Nancy's account of the Athenian co-originarity of philosophy and politics, the Athenian *polis* could be taken as practical achievement of man, who was *zoon politikon* insofar as he was *anthropos logikos*, and correspondingly the *polis* would appear as the practical achievement of the *logos*; then philosophy, being the articulation of the 'cosmic' *logos*, appeared in a way as the ideal subject of politics. At the same time the *polis*, the assembly of deliberating citizens was the subject of philosophy. Our present constellation, thought all the way down, is then radically – and doubly – different: By not realizing a rational, harmonious order but rather the heterogeneous plurality of differences, contemporary politics can no longer count as an achievement of philosophy (or as an

achievement at all), which in turn has itself lost or has been abandoned by the *logos* and which can no longer even think itself as being on the quest of founding the practical order. Both in politics and in philosophy then, there is no rational ('cosmological') order left, no essence, no foundation and no reconciling/accomplishing subjectivity – only the plurality of contingencies which have to be taken seriously as originary and justified in themselves.[12]

To hold fast onto an intertwining of philosophy and politics grounded in their essence, an intertwining of origin and destination, of ground, community and thought is thus possible only at the price of a denial of this disintegration of the origin of commonality and of order. But the disintegration or dis-position of inessential plurality would find a return in such a denial, perverted to exclusion and oppression – thus Nancy's theory in fact results in a merely negative imperative to resist such exclusion and to insist on an equal inclusion of all.[13] But for the politically interested philosophy, there is worse to come: Just as aporetic and as fatal as that horizon of philosophico-politics has proven to be, just as usual remains a perspective on politics that still subscribes to it, or that at least has only to some extent broken with it. Even a conception of democracy that understands and aims at democracy as an institution of an unspecified and unspecifiable meaning and of an orientability that has to be kept open, in the end brings the sacrifice of eliminating or at least concealing the 'common sense' by its theoretical and idealistic strictness and thus fails to fully do justice to the being-in-common, Nancy explains (cf. *SW*, pp. 88-93). This means a heavy burden for the diverse attempts to think the political, a burden which may have its ground in the concept of the political.[14] Consequently, for Nancy, the question of politics is the following one:

If sovereignty is the grand, political term for defining community [...] that has nothing beyond itself, what becomes of sovereignty when it is revealed that it is nothing but a singular plural spacing? How is one to think sovereignty as the "nothing" of the "with" that is laid bare? At the same time, if political sovereignty has always signified the refusal of domination [...], how is one to think the bare sovereignty of the "with" against domination, whether this is the domination of being-together by some other means or the domination of togetherness by itself (by the regulation of its "automatic" control)?

In one way or another, bare sovereignty [...] presupposes that one take a certain distance from the politico-philosophical order and from the realm of "political philosophy" [...] in order to engage in a thinking, the site of which is the very constitution, imagination, and signification of the political, which allows this thinking to retrace its path in its retreat and beginning from this retreat. The retreat of the political does not signify the disappearance of the political. It only signifies the disappearance of the philosophical presupposition of the whole politico-philosophical order, which is always an ontological presupposition. (*BSP*, pp. 36-37 (transl. mod.))

So, how is sovereignty to be thought as presentation of being-with, how is it to be thought as being put up against domination? This is a matter of investigating sovereignty without turning to any category modeled after classical political (subject-)categories, a matter of exploring an apolitical sovereignty. The 'question of

the political' (or the 'question of politics' for that matter) under the condition of the retreat of the political, i.e. in our present modern condition then changes from a *genitivus subiectivus* to a *genitivus obiectivus*, i.e. the concepts of politics and of the political altogether are at disposal. Inasmuch as this does not aim at 'another politics', but at a certain *praxis* and *ethos*,[15] and inasmuch as the subsumption of politics and of the political under the verdict of philosophico-political is consistent, we can call Nancy's project even an 'anti-politics'. In fact, in this interpretation politics is actually 'devoted to its own erasure' (Norris, p. 289), for it is the disclosure and the unfolding of the originary distancedness which makes every politics absurd. On the other hand, as a differentiated tradition of western Marxism[16] bears witness, while such an *anti-political* thinking may well lack operativeness or potential for instrumentality, it need not necessarily be an *apolitical* thinking. For already the mere utopia of a society or community free of politics – however obscure it may be in each concrete case – has a meaning that affects present concrete politics in one way or another, although that is probably not to be deployed in the present context.

But at least we should thus far agree with a critique that alleges a lack of an adequate taking into account of the inevitability, of the productivity and of the dignity of politics.[17] However, while I go along with that critical intuition, I doubt that the burden of proof that such a critique must cope with has sufficiently been met: The critique namely has either to give reasons for the supposed 'necessity' of political judgment without reintroducing essential categories (like e.g. antagonality) to the ontology of being-with, or to explain the 'dignity' of political judgment, of political commitment and of the political as such in some other way, again without

presenting it like some quasi-tragedy of intended rational treatment of aporias and differends.

But maybe we do not have to push the critique this far and can instead try and put at least the *praxis* of the 'sovereignty of the *with*' into a relation to the political and study what the explication of such a relation would mean for a conception of politics. Then, let us concede to Nancy: Sovereignty can no longer even be a concept grasping the essential autonomy of a community – for the simple reason that there is no such thing. That is to say, sovereignty can no longer be a concept describing a community that declares its self-availability, its self-transparency and its bounds as its essential and distinctive (virtual) 'properties', a community that imposes a common and self-donated order on itself as its own unfinished and unfinishable project and that understands or even invents itself by means of this project. If we still (with Nancy) want to maintain that 'sovereignty' should describe that which articulates the being-in-common of a community of singulars and if we want to maintain that it be possible to confront any domination of this community by something else than this plural common being with 'sovereignty', then that 'sovereignty' will have to be spelled out as a *praxis* that on the one hand 'does justice' to the naked *with* of the being-with and that on the other hand, while remaining fully present and effective, withdraws rather principally from any domination: A *praxis* which undermines and maybe hinders or prevents domination, which fights and which fragments domination or which maybe opens domination (for domination's own 'undominatingness', for the undominated and for the undominating). Then the *with* is the criterion of adequacy, even of justice itself and it is that which permits, inspires, explains and gives reason to the mentioned imperative of equality (or fraternity). The *praxis* of such a sovereignty would be 'apolitical' inasmuch as it would not weigh in

a power- or autonomy-oriented context. But it would be 'political' inasmuch as it would cross every such context, inasmuch as, while it could not be brought to bear directly against domination, it still would have destabilizing effects on domination. This *praxis* may then well be the 'most political' that Nancy is able to think in the framework of his approach, but *how exactly* does he think it? Only when this question is answered, if both the 'political' and the 'apolitical' dimensions of that *praxis* have been tied to a specific conception of it, only then can we judge the political or a-political or anti-political character of Nancy's theory. And another step back: How is that constellation of the *with* to be described, that is supposed to be reflected in the mentioned *praxis*?

While the plural singulars are well defined, for what concerns us here, they are so merely as 'anyones', as the full and concrete beings that they all each are – and 'all' means here: all that are there with or near one another or at the same time, i.e. absolutely all, there is no other, no outside, in distinction to which a 'common' of this community could be delineated.[18] Also the link or connection of the singuli is not apt to assert a common essence, but pure accident. It is the mere at-the-same-time-in-the-same-place of several singulars, the time and place of which are realized as well only *in* or *through* the common appearance, i.e. in/through/as the mutual exteriority and exposition, in/through/as the mutual contact and affectability of the singulars and in/through/as their respective openings. According to recent texts the spatial character of com-pearance can be further emphasized, for if *Dasein* is being *there*, then this *there* can only mean: there, put before 'us' to see (ek-sisting), at a concrete place, tied in distances to other concrete singulars and in a space that is stretched out by those distances, i.e. by the compearance of plural singulars. *Compearance*: If

there is something or someone, there is 'always already' many, that 'always already' concern, touch, confront, flee one another.[19]

> Far from being a mere impoverished and inert objectivity offered up to
> the purposes and the manipulations of humanity, this factuality, or the
> world as being-here of all the *beings-here*, is itself also, qua simple
> being-thrown-here-of-things, an *existentiale* of *Dasein*. (*SW*, p. 57)

It is a matter of taking seriously both the spatiality and the materiality of the 'being-thrown-here-of-things' (which is an expression that, in spite of all due seriousness, should reveal a good deal of self-irony from the part of this ontologist). Ontology has to be understood less as a logic than as a sort of materialism. Already compearance's materiality is, following Nancy, everything but a closed and indistinct immanence, rather is it the difference which makes the appearance of any thing whatsoever possible, inasmuch as it is an originary expansion and divergence.

> If *Dasein* must be characterized by its *Jemeinigkeit* […], by the
> singularity of someone having or making sense of "mineness" (or
> ipseity), this *someone* would be unthinkable without the material-
> transcendental (existential) resource that the some-oneness of the thing in
> general is, without the *reality* of the *res* as material difference. Matter
> means here: the reality of the difference – and différ*a*nce – by which
> *there is some thing(s)* and not merely the identity of a pure inherence [...].
> Real difference, difference of the *res*: if there is something, there are

several things; otherwise, there is nothing, no "there is". Reality is the

reality *of the several* things there are; necessarily numerous reality. (*SW*,

pp. 57f. (transl. mod.))

To acknowledge this materiality means not to ignore the material surfaces of things,

their contacts and their distances; paying heed to it opens access to resources of

difference and différ*a*nce, but also to resources of mutual contact and affection,

resources that are beyond subjectivist or idealist ambitions of appropriation and that

expose a net-like or rhyzomatic transitivity.[20] The (existentially) first theme of every

being is no inertia or inherence of any sorts, but first of all the distancing 'giving' or

the 'giving' that resides in the distance, the 'taking place', 'Statt haben', 'Y-avoir-

lieu'. Nancy calls this existential 'worldliness'.[21] The 'taking place' is the *quod* and

the *quomodo* of that very *quod* (if one can say so) at the same time:

> The *there* of the "there is" is nothing but spacing as such […] As such,
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> then, the *there* is nothing other than the Wittgensteinian "That" of the
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> world, while at the same time being the world's original "how". In the
>
> *there*, the "that" and the "how" of the world ['"que" et "comment" ça fait
>
> monde', A.W.] coincide. It is not a place of places, or a *sensorium Dei*,
>
> or an a priori form. More likely, it would be a priori matter – but here the
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> a priori, in its *act of birth*, would be the sensible entelechy itself: the
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> unity, opened within itself, of the touched/touching. (*SW*, p. 159)

The world is at first the totality of the net of contacts and distances, of moments of pressure and of traction, of weights and extensions. Its appearing is a spreading and unfolding as well as an aperture, a divide and a leakage, a description that Nancy seeks to clarify with the category of *areality* of singular plural being.[22] But as soon as we are talking more specifically about the *Dasein*, i.e. the being that experiences itself as *there*, right in this world, then we have to think about perception and the – possible, aspired, evaded or factual – *touching* as a material-corporal link of beings, *and* as the evidence of their mutual delimitation, *and* as their mutual exposition/affectability. Touching has to be understood as the *factum* of being-with, but just as well as the *facere* of it, as *praxis* of being-with, for it links the materiality of sensual perception of being-in-common's areality to the creation of this very (dis-)assembly and to the manifest, even understandable exposition of singular-plural being. Introducing the subject of language at this point, Nancy can give that argument its full weight, for in this perspective the exposition *par excellence* is provided by language which is both in the world of material differences (as sound, patterns of writing etc.) and outside of it (as meaning). By recognizing the outside of the world inside of it, one is confronted immediately with the plural singular being, its relationality and its 'transimmanence',[23] but one is confronted with it as something that is 'in retreat'. It is then no wonder that writing is presented once more as paradigmatic model of communication, i.e. as that understanding of language that maintains a revealing as well as a binding and relating power and at the same time makes the unavailability and indefiniteness of each of its terms and poles plain to see.[24] But before discussing how this *praxis* of being-with is to be assessed *from a political angle* and even before the objection is raised that touching or writing may well be forms of *praxis*, but hardly an *ethos* (let alone a politics), I would like to twist

the issue once more: For what is this supposed to mean, the touching or writing *exposes* the singular-plural being?

   As we have seen, insofar as the delimitation is the limit of the extension of single fragments and their contact with or by another, it 'makes' the 'there are' of things; but this very same delimitation, insofar as it is a kind of split (self-unavailability, disjointing, finiteness), contains the *reference* of this fragment *to another* fragment and the latter's (different and itself in turn singular) sharing of that same split, of the very same distance and the very same fracture. He or she who can 'read' such a reference, and who has a 'sense' for such a reference, i.e. he or she who is more or less 'at home' in the space of imagination, of symbols and of language, will comprehend the boundary as the exposition of the 'making' the 'with' that is in the 'there are'. And 'exposition' here gets a specific meaning: It (re)presents the sharing of a nothing, of a lack or of a gap – of the nothing that 'generates' the plurality of singular-plural being and that 'makes' the *with* of the being-with. And this (re)presentation corresponds exactly to Nancy's concept of the symbolic:[25]

> The proper value of symbolism is in making a *symbol*, that is, in making
> a connection or a joining, and in giving a face [*figure*] to this liaison by
> making an *image*. Insofar as the relation is imagined [*se représente*], and
> because the relation as such is nothing other than its own representation,
> the symbolic is what is real in such a relation. By no means, however, is
> such a relation the representation of something that is real (in the
> secondary, mimetic sense of representation), but the relation is, and is
> nothing other than, what is real in the representation – its effectiveness
> and its efficacy. […] The sole criterion of symbolization is [...] the

capacity for allowing a certain play, in and by the image-symbol, with the joining, the distancing, the opened interval that articulates it as *symbol*: this word simply means "put with" [...]. Therefore, the "symbolic" is not simply an aspect of being-social: on the one hand, it is this Being itself; on the other hand, the symbolic does not take place without (re)presentation, the (re)presentation of one another [*des uns aux autres*] according to which they are with one another [*les-uns-avec-les-autres*]. (*BSP*, pp. 57f.)

Nancy has developed a complex critique of the 'mimetic conception of representation' that is quite important to him:[26] Representation is not to be understood as the reflection of some absent thing that would be primary, genuine and authentic, but rather it is the 'presencing something', making an appearance, a staging, beyond the ideal-/material-dichotomy and beyond the dichotomy of true being/mere façade. Representation is at the same time imaginary, actual, and effective. Thus, a representation of the bonds of being-with in the sense of presencing, symbolizing and signifying is not as much its reproduction and its replication for the ensuing theoretical and practical treatment, as it is the very binding of that tie, (another) *praxis* of being-with.

But now it follows from what has been said, that only a symbolism that emphasizes its own fragmentariness is adequate to itself and can represent/'make' the with.[27] 'In a paradoxical way, it is precisely when the symbolic order is interrupted that it arrives at its own essence.' (*SW*, p. 136), that is to say that only an interrupted symbolic order touches the representation of a tie, the 'let-emerge' of being which is always already being-with. Then it is the *praxis* of a certain, 'fractal' use of symbol-

images, of a 'fractal' writing that does justice to the *with* of the being-with. Not a certain politics, but a certain language, a certain style.[28]

But how can any style be the sovereignty that is a detriment to domination, that undermines or even opposes domination? If the political impact of language, writing and 'style' were indeed limited to the opening and the keeping-open of political identities, associations, discourses and constellations, then the practical result of Nancy's ontology would hardly be more than a commonplace that would not have required the theoretical effort we have just been through. But the complexity of the sketched model raises expectations that there might be room for further development and continuation, even if they are not (yet) met in Nancy's texts. Presumably such a continuation is not possible without an equally complex and accurate conception of what political institutions (like law or the state), processes, decisions, actors and parties are, what power is and how struggles of power work, how they are fostered and constrained in and by political and legal contexts, how legitimacy is created and communicated. In the following last part I want to pursue at least the 'flashes' of new approaches in Nancy's even more recent texts. I want to suggest that there can be found at least the preparation of such a continuation and a 'rehabilitation of politics' – yet unfortunately without the mentioned adequately complex conception of politics gaining much shape.

III

In the essays 'Des sens de la démocratie' and 'Tout est-il politique?', Nancy returns to his diagnosis of a retreat of the (philosophico-)political. Only this time he is not discussing how being-in-common or being-with may be traced in that retreat, but

rather what and where *politics* is or remains in that situation. In the course of his reflections, he concludes that a reconsideration of the relation of politics and the 'common' is at issue, a reconsideration of whether politics and being-with are identical or if one depends upon the other, or if there are any other forms of determination, exhaustion or overcoming. In a certain way, he apparently is no longer assuming that politics are grasped entirely by the subsumption under the concept of the philosophico-political and thus puts the differend of politics and being-with on the agenda again.

While in what was sketched above, Nancy has analyzed and criticized the double movement of the ancient *polis* as synchronous unfolding and denial of a lack of substantiality, subjectivity, identity and commonality, he now attempts to elucidate so-to-say the other side of the coin, i.e. to explore and assess the double movement as (re)presentation of a common (maybe self-given) principle of social order and as always co-present and co-presented transitoriness, instability and liquefaction of that same principle:

> The *polis* has represented itself simultaneously as a common given measure or as the auto-donation of a common measure, *and* as indefinite instability and a permanent putting back under construction [...] of the measure of the incommensurable [that is *being-with*, A.W.]. The measure has a name: Justice. Justice engages, for not being given, the exercise of a power (thus of counter-powers, of reversals of power, of alliances of power etc.). […] Politics as a giving (auto- or hetero-donation, human or divine) of an essence or of a common destiny has withdrawn: it has withdrawn as a totality or as totalization. In that sense, not everything is

political. But politics retraces itself as the site of exercise of power facing

an incommensurable justice. (*TP*, p. 24f., my transl.)[29]

So it is *justice* that opens a space of power and relations of power or that pervades

that space. By (re)presenting the *distance* between figuration, (self-)consciousness

and (self-)control, the distance between power in general on the one side and being-

with and sense on the other side, justice can itself become a symbolization and

articulation that can motivate and orient a *praxis* of treating power.

> Politics is not in charge of identity and of the destiny of the common, but
>
> it is in charge of the – be that infinite – regulation of justice (so it has to
>
> cope with power). The common puts existence at stake (and thus it has to
>
> cope with sense). [For democracy, A.W.] it is a matter of the gap
>
> between sense and power. One certainly does not exclude the other, but
>
> does not replace it either. […] The theologico-political subsumes
>
> together power and sense, justice and existence, and it absorbs the
>
> common in the political (or vice versa).[30] […] It is a matter of thinking
>
> the interval between the common and the political, then. (*SD*, p. 47f., my
>
> transl.)

Justice can be understood as an appeal to keep open those incommensurabilities, for

by definition 'it does not absorb in it all the other sites of existence' (*TP*, p. 24, my

transl.), i.e. it does not absorb the diverse constellations and figurations of

(re)presentation of the incommensurable and unavailable being. Justice does not take

up, nor take in, neither does it even out nor does it assimilate those other spheres that are incommensurable among themselves as well, even though they are touching and contaminating each other. Then politics is no longer the site of a formation (production or surfacing) of the *principium* of the community – nor even of the presentation of the incommensurability and unavailability of that origin –, for this would be at stake in other spheres ('art', 'religion', 'law', 'thought', 'science', 'production' etc.), but its task and its concern is the distance, the dis-pute and de-bate, *Auseinandersetzung*.

> Politics redraws itself at this place: as the site from which to keep open
> that incommensurability, and in general to maintain open the
> incommensurability of justice as well as of value. […] It is thus no longer
> a site of giving-a-form nor of giving-presence to the incommensurability
> or to some originary and final unity, in short to a "humanity". Politics is
> in charge of space and of spacing [...], but not of figure. […] Politics
> henceforth has to understand itself as the specific site of an articulation of
> a non-unity – and of symbolization of a non-figure. […] Politics becomes
> precisely the site of detotalization. (*TP*, pp. 25, my transl.)

Maybe politics is not more than a framework of power struggles, the primary subject of which is the 'administration' or 'managing' of the community or of society. But then it is at the same time and basically the struggle between positions and figurations of the being-in-common (identities, interests etc.), and as such, as this struggle itself, its issue/meaning/sense is the distance between these figurations and

between them and the incommensurable being-with. Justice is the proliferation of the simultaneity of hegemonic figurations *and* of their instability that is implied in politics.

IV

> Between power and sense, maybe there is a new form of the relation of man to him- or herself, who could not be "his/her own end" (if that is the ground of democracy) without splitting up with his-/herself in order to go beyond. (*SD*, p. 48, my transl.)

Let us finally return shortly to the question of democracy. Sadly it is still not clear how to 'do justice' to the exigency of justice in the context of particular concrete practices of power, and what exactly and concretely it would mean to keep the space open. There remains much work to be done at this point and only in the results of this work would we be able to judge the 'positivity' of Nancy's conception of politics/the political. But insofar as democracy can be identified as a *praxis* that proves to correspond to the mentioned 'fractal' symbolicity, and since in democracy, man (splitting up with his-/herself) persists as his/her own end, democracy could turn out to be, in all its power-laden responsibility *in front of the obligation* of justice, one such praxis that would indeed be *resolutely political*.

NOTES

¹ In his article 'Jean-Luc Nancy and the myth of the common' (*Constellations* 7/2000, pp. 272-295), Andrew Norris researches the impact Nancy's reflections about community have on political theory. While he subscribes to Nancy's fundamental critique of every form of totalitarianism, he sees a severe lack of determination and an unsettling abstention when it comes to talking about those practices we are normally calling 'political'. Neither a reader who is interested in political decision-making and –executing in general, nor one who is interested in emancipatory politics in particular can find in Nancy's texts any orientation for the difficult situations that political actors are immerged in, he argues. Even a somewhat more descriptive theory of political processes is going to have difficulties applying the tools Nancy offers to its own work – all of which by the way corresponds rather well to Nancy's own self-understanding (cf. 'Opening Address to the Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political', in: J.-L. Nancy / Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Retreating the Political*, ed. by S. Sparks, London: Routledge 1997, pp. 107-121, here pp. 108-110). Norris further argues that Nancy fails to see the positive aspects of a tradition of political thought that understands the admittedly problematic construction of collectivity to be a response to a practical and political need for such orientation. In his analysis, Norris refers to several of Nancy's texts that have been published in English ('The Nazi Myth', in: *Critical Inquiry* 16-2/1990; *The Inoperative Community*, Univ. of Minnesota Press 1991 (in what follows: *IC*); 'La Comparution/The Compearance: From the Existence of "Communism" to the Community of "Existence"', in: *Political Theory* 20-3/1992; *The Experience of Freedom*, Stanford Univ. Press 1993) and to Jean-Jacques Rousseau to delineate the tradition of contract theories. If all this is true at least to some extent, and if Nancy does not even see himself as a 'political philosopher' (cf. D. Köveker / A. Niederberger / A. Wagner, 'Dem Politischen mangelt es an Symbolizität – Ein Gespräch mit Jean-Luc Nancy', in: *Information Philosophie* 4/2002, pp. 33-41, here p. 39), then why should we still explore his texts as telling us something for politics, for political theory or for political philosophy? Is this justified by more than just Nancy's continuing to use terms like 'communism', 'totalitarianism', 'justice'? I am not sure how to positively answer this, but I am going to argue that Nancy opens a way to link his ontology to a certain ethics, and a way to spot some points that a political theory at least has to take into account when it reflects about its own categories and perspectives.

² I am going to refer mostly to *The Sense of the World*, Univ. of Minnesota Press 1998 (in what follows: *SW*), *Being Singular Plural*, Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press 2000 (in what follows: *BSP*), 'Des sens de la démocratie', in: *Transeuropéennes* 17/2000, pp. 45-48 (in what follows: *SD*) and 'Tout est-il politique ?', in: *Actuel Marx* 28/2000, pp. 20-26 (in what follows: *TP*).

³ Norris, p. 275.

⁴ In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy takes this analysis of 'immanentism' even further: The collective identity or common subjectivity that is supposed to be established as its own 'work' is presented and presents itself inspired by a model of communion, i.e. by a model of indistinct and homogeneous continuity of its elements which in turn are taken

up completely with their immersion in this continuity and which possess no property that would not be reflected in or reflections of that continuity. But this, concludes Nancy, is the continuity of pure matter, the web of uninspired atoms and particles that has nothing beyond, behind or between it. Thus, the truth of *this* community actually is death, a truth that has been realized in grotesque ways by totalitarian regimes. Cf. *IC*, pp. 12-17.

[5] As Todd May points out (in *Reconsidering Difference*, Pennsylvania State Univ. Press 1997, esp. pp. 40-43), Nancy's conception itself is not 'operable' in some anti-totalitarian project without self-contradiction. There may be no fundamental reason that would favor Nancy's more skeptical conception of community in comparison to an essential one and preclude the risk of totalitarianism beyond doubt, and while 'in the end, the idea that there may be a conceptual or philosophical guarantee against totalitarianism is suspect' (p. 43), May raises an objection similar to Norris' reproach of irony/cynicism (see below, note 10.): To adopt a Nancyan conception of community without having strong values of anti-totalitarianism that give good reasons to do so (but which is the very gesture that is criticized by it) will disarm political actors/communities trying to come to terms with the risk of totalitarianism. Thorsten Bonacker, on the other hand, argues for a 'community of deconstruction' that pursues a 'politics of the common by resisting its reification' and that has transformed the anti-fundamental finitude of community into a conscious and accountable political endeavor of opening essential communities and overcoming totalitarianism in all its forms (Cf. Th. Bonacker, 'Die Gemeinschaft der Dekonstruktion. Zum normativen Gehalt liberaler Gemeinschaften', in: A. Kern / Chr. Menke (ed.), *Philosophie der Dekonstruktion*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2002, pp. 264-288). Below I will be trying to sketch a communicative *praxis* or an *ethos* (if such can be construed without essential foundation) that is not as disarmed or disarming as May suspects while it does not need to draw its political effectiveness from a consciously adopted and valued project of overcoming totalitarianism or even only deconstructing other, essential communities, as Bonacker suggests, and I will be trying to elucidate points that a more political (more committed, more power-conscious, more powerful) approach could link up to.

[6] This title is modified throughout the course of Nancy's works, since it still seems to allude too much to an essential model of community. (E.g. in the term being-in-common, what would be 'the common' *in* which being supposedly is?) In his more recent works Nancy writes of 'compearance' or of 'being-with'.

[7] In 'Ex nihilo summum (De la souveraineté)' (in: *La création du monde ou la mondialisation*, Paris: Galilée 2002, pp. 145-172), Nancy unfolds this logic of absoluteness. While that text focuses on sovereignty and so concentrates more on absolute altitude, it seems to me that the logic in question would apply to absolute profundity as well. Nancy mentions this himself in a few places, cf. pp. 148, 162.

[8] And *what* a being is, is precisely not determined by an essence but rather produced as the contingent or at least historical process of it situating itself and being situated in those openings, retracing them in turn. Thus, Andrew Norris writes: 'As being-in-common we are cast into a condition of plurality. And such a condition is by definition one

characterized by difference. [... T]he ontology of the individual is always already that of what [Nancy] terms "compearance". [… I]n this mutual exposure we share an infinite lack of infinite identity. To put it as baldly as possible, what we have in common is precisely not a shared identity, but rather the "fact" that we are different from one another. Because we share this difference, we are in relation to one another.' (Norris, p. 277) While all of this is true in a way, texts like *Being singular plural* seem to slightly shift the emphasis: The category of difference is used less and less prominently in the explication of 'compearance', presumably because it still conveys too much that it is a matter of different identities. Currently, Nancy tries to argue more with a spatial than with a logical model, focusing on contiguity and being-near (*auprès de*), on the spatial distance and the 'material' aspect of physical touch. (In what could be taken as an explanation of what 'difference' could mean in this context, Nancy tells us that 'the *alterity* of the other is its originary *contiguity* with the "proper" origin.' (*BSP*, p. 6, my emphasis) or that 'the alterity of the other is its being-origin. Conversely, the originarity of the origin is its being-other, but it is a being-other than every being for and in crossing through [*à travers*] all being. Thus, the originarity of the origin is not a property that would distinguish a being from all others.' (*BSP*, p. 11) Also, Nancy's argument concerning the being-with focuses in large parts on 'with' (*avec*) having its etymological origins in 'near' (*apud hoc*). Cf. his 'Conloquium', in: R. Esposito, *Communitas – origine et destin de la communauté*, Paris: *puf* 2000, pp. 3-10, esp. pp. 7ff.; cf. also Köveker / Niederberger / Wagner, 'Dem Politischen mangelt es an Symbolizität – Ein Gespräch mit Jean-Luc Nancy', pp 36f.) Also, see more on this below.

[9] And Nancy concedes this as well: Cf. *BSP*, pp. 73f; 'Ex nihilo summum', pp. 166f.

[10] Cf. Norris, p. 289. Norris adds that the requirement of 'undergoing the experience of one's sharing' and the associated experience of a lack of foundation and of substance, the experience of self-unavailability and self-strangeness will necessarily affect one's own political identity. For Norris, such an *ethos* allows only essentially *ironic* forms of political identities, and this irony for him seems to even outweigh the mandatory respect and the required keeping-open: 'It is not that respect has ceased to be a political virtue of the authentic life. It is rather a question of what must be respected. What must be respected is not other identities, but other *ironies*, other ironic undercuttings of political identity.' (p. 287) In my opinion Norris is right to doubt that it is possible to maintain an all the way down ironical relationship to one's 'own' political identity and to one's 'own' political community. But it remains to be made clear if what Nancy suggests, or what his suggestions end up with, is indeed an attitude of irony. And this will probably depend on whether we are willing to more or less fundamentally revise what we understand by 'political' (identities, projects, capabilities, structures etc.).

[11] In the discussion that follows, I am giving a brief account of a *topos* that Jacques Derrida brought up in 'The Ends of Man' (in: *Margins of Philosophy*, Univ. of Chicago Press 1982, pp. 111-136) and that has been discussed time and again by Nancy since then. It appears e.g. in 'The "Retreat" of the Political' (in: Nancy / Lacoue-Labarthe, *Retreating the Political*, pp. 122-137), I am referring mostly to *BSP*, pp. 21-28.

[12] Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe (following Derrida who in turn follows Heidegger in this diagnosis) discussed this situation dubbed 'the closure of metaphysics' explicitly as early as their 'Opening Address to the Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political' from 1980 (pp. 107-112), but still in Nancy's more recent *The Sense of the World* some diagnosis like it is present from the very beginning, but rather as a point of departure from which to embark on the (not so) new 'theoretical' endeavor of fully acknowledging it and of understanding its implications (cf. *SW*, pp. 4-9).

[13] But the equality which imposes itself in this imperative has to be understood as an equality of beings that are different in every respect and yet at the same time as an equality that implies each time concrete and substantial claims – a difficulty that has among others lead Nancy to adopt the term of 'fraternity' as better suited, which has opened an ongoing debate with Derrida, for whom the latter term cannot be purged of its paternalistic-patriarchic logic. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, London: Verso 1997; Köveker / Niederberger / Wagner, 'Dem Politischen mangelt es an Symbolizität – ein Gespräch mit Jean-Luc Nancy', pp. 40f.

[14] The allusion to the Schmittian title is deliberate: Maybe it is already and foremost the very attempt to find a definite concept of the political, that engages in a philosophico-political project and which bars any way out of the 'metaphysical' trap. This is at least what I think to be Nancy's apprehension.

[15] Cf. *BSP*, p. 71.

[16] Moments of this tradition can be found e.g. in Walter Benjamin's and Theodor W. Adorno's texts, more recently in texts by Alex Demirovic, or, again, rather differently, in Antonio Negri's texts.

[17] Cf. Norris, p. 274.

[18] Nancy mentions three characteristic qualities of the 'singuli': their respective uniqueness, 'whateverness' and exposition. Cf. *SW*, pp. 68-75. These three qualities and the lack of an outside, respectively the fact that the outside as the empty and yet constitutive link of all the singuli is in a certain way inside (see below), result in the verdict of inadequateness that has to be passed on any antagonistic model of sociality (as suggested e.g. by Schmitt or Laclau/Mouffe). Any such model which operates with the (projected or imagined) negation of one's own identity – which would then be defined e.g. by the *Volk* or by the web of differential relations – by a special singular that appears and has its effects as being an essential antagonist, can only inadequately render the profound being-in-common and may be undermined (also on other, more directly 'political', levels) by a *praxis* that would correspond better to it.

[19] Again, a possible dispute about whether it is the 'between' that constitutes the distinctness of the plural singulars or whether it is the other way round, that these distinct singulars constitute a spatial distance in their 'one-another-' would ignore that the point Nancy is making consists precisely in replacing the question of originarity and dependency with the recognition of the fact that there is always already distance *and* poles, between *and* singulars, recognition of the fact that we always have to deal with plural singulars. He explains that the '"with" is at once both more and less

than "relation" or "bond", especially if such relation or bond presupposes the preexistence of the terms upon which it relies; the "with" is the exact contemporary of its terms; it is, in fact, their contemporaneity.' (*BSP*, pp. 34f.)

[20] By alluding to the physical concept of quanta that tries to formulate the discontinuity of material particles, Nancy sketches the project of a quantum-philosophy of nature that could demonstrate workings of différ*a*nce even in its description of natural objects (cf. *SW*, p. 62f). The nothing that is between the quanta is in fact nothing, not another sort of 'particle' itself, but it is the 'transcendence' that opens up the solid and continuous totality which pure immanentism would be. Without that transcendent 'nothing', no 'contact' would be possible, but there would just be continuity of some 'one'.

[21] Nancy writes about the *passibilité* that the world is, and in doing so, he plays with a blending of *possibilité*, the possibility of appearances and of *(se) passer*, which has a whole cluster of meanings ranging from 'to happen' (an event) or 'to become present' (a barely perceptible detail), over 'to go by' (time) or 'to pass' (from one place to another), to finally even 'to refrain from'. In the present text, 'appearing' is supposed to reflect at least some of those allusions. (Cf. *SW*, pp. 59-63.)

[22] By using the term *aréalité*, Nancy wants to point us to the fact that there are at issue at the same time the material-located-spatial constellation of extended singularities (*areal*); the materiality and the corporal fact of collision or of being-directed-at-one-another of the singularities (*réalité du à*); and the nothingness, the imperceptible *rien* of the *res* that constitutes the between and in which the being-with is inscribed (*a-réalité*). (Cf. again *SW*, pp. 59-63.)

[23] *SW*, p. 55.

[24] I cannot go into more details here, but for Nancy's own discussion of this argument see *BSP*, pp.83-88 and *SM*, pp. 118ff.

[25] Nancy's concept of the symbolic takes its starting point with the ancient use of sym-bola, i.e. of corresponding fragments of pottery that were given to persons parting as a sign of identification and as a pledge of mutual obligation.

[26] And actually the French 'representer' conveys already more of that which Nancy has in mind than the English 'to represent' or the German 'darstellen/vorstellen' (let alone 'stellvertreten') do. Nancy's critique can be found more explicitly and carried out as the main issue in texts like 'Scène' (together with Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe, in: *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, 46/1992, pp. 73-98) or 'La représentation interdite' (in: J.-L. Nancy, *Au fond des images*, Paris: Galilée 2003, pp. 57-99).

[27] There's a full chapter ('Art, a Fragment', pp. 123-139) in *The Sense of the World* that discusses the question of what 'fragmentary' means. Nancy introduces the concept of the 'fractal', to make aware of the dynamic and iterating, i.e. deferring character of the boundaries. He also discusses questions of art and technology and of the 'coming-to-the-world' of the singulars. I can not cover this here.

[28] Quite consequently, already 'The Inoperative Community' is followed by an essay called 'Literary Communism' (pp. 71-81) that discusses this idea. It is taken up again and developed further in later texts as well (cf. *SW*, pp. 16-21, 118-122; *BSP*, pp. 85-88) – where, for obvious reasons, Nancy also insists that 'style' is not to be understood in a simplifying, philological way.

[29] This is not without similarities to Jacques Rancière's thoughts about politics – which present politics as an opening of a 'partition of the sensible'. Especially in his *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Univ. of Minnesota Press 1998, the argument about the factual measuring and allocation implied in any order of the common is emphasized and then confronted with the naming of a part(y) that is incommensurable to the present 'partition', whereby the possibility of a new measure and of a new partition is opened. And it is this very moment of opening (and not the old nor the new order) that Rancière calls *politics*. While the delineating of many of the differences to Nancy would require a more in-depth discussion than I can cover here, two traits are rather evident: Firstly, Nancy is much more skeptical than Rancière about a tight link between the order of the common and politics, and secondly he is much more 'generous' as to which events can be classified as 'political', insofar as for him – emphasizing the *praxis* of communication – they are better understood as day-to-day events while for Rancière they are rather exceptional. Maybe the reason for both of these differences lies in that Nancy seems to see a much greater indeterminacy and instability in every order, in every articulation and in meaning and sense in general.

[30] And it is again this theologico-political (note that it is no longer called philosophico-political) subsumption that would raise expectations of obtaining insights into political, emancipatory, justice-oriented *praxis* by exploring the being-with.