

The Undecidability of the Politics of Politics: On Geoffrey Bennington's *Scatter 1*

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The appearance of Geoffrey Bennington's recent book, *Scatter 1: The Politics of Politics in Foucault, Heidegger, and Derrida* (New York: Fordham UP, 2016), constitutes a veritable event—of *reading*—that offers an important intervention in contemporary philosophical thought and its political consequences. Already in the subtitle, one notices the very phrase that will play a crucial role throughout the entirety of the book—"the politics of politics". The phrase indicates a kind of gap or elusive space that has been, according to Bennington, consistently ignored in most accounts of political philosophy. The "politics of politics" exposes us to the very undecidability of the borders that seem to delimit philosophy, politics, rhetoric, and other domains. By trying to demonstrate the destabilizing force of this phrase, Bennington traces out an important deconstruction of politics that will have considerable effects on any attempts to formulate a political thought.

One of the main targets of Bennington's book is the kind of political thought that seeks "to derive practical prescriptions from supposed theoretical truths" (15). The main fault with this approach, Bennington argues, is that it has sought to provide a rigid separation between truth and falsity so as to construct an entire politics that is guided by either the most stringent dogmatism or inflexible moralism. In this way, political philosophy avoids the very *politicity* of politics insofar as it attempts to provide a stable foundation that would offer a model or blueprint that would put an end to the *undecidability* that is involved in politics. In stark opposition to this erasure of politics, Bennington will develop a reading that works through this very problem in the writings of Foucault, Heidegger and Derrida with the aim of providing a "necessarily ambiguous disruption of the teleological thinking that is endemic in politics and political philosophy" (4).

In Bennington's approach, deconstruction will be the name of this disruption of teleological thinking that will allow us to reorient our very relation to the politicity of politics. He also, however, offers another name for this kind of political thinking—*scatter*. The latter notion indicates the possibility of thinking politics in its incessant opening, as opposed to the attempted closure of politics proposed by political philosophy. In a sense, scatter can perhaps be understood as making explicit the political implications of deconstruction. In developing this notion, Bennington will pay close attention to the very question of truth, which will play a crucial role throughout the book. For, if political philosophy orientates itself to politics in relation to a teleological thought in which truth is understood as the fulfillment of a *telos*, then the thought of scatter will recognize a dissemination in the very notion of truth that exposes us to its undecidability—making explicit that which resists or escapes the traditional understandings of truth. It is in this surplus or excess of truth that Bennington will identify the incessant opening of the political dimension, which involves nothing more and nothing less than the "politics of politics".

Bennington first addresses the question of truth as it appears in Foucault's later writings on *parrhēsia*. These texts show the way in which the entirety of Foucault's later project hinges on recuperating an understanding of

parrhēsia as free or open speech in which individuals could speak truth to power. While Foucault's analysis of *parrhēsia* has played an important role in the development of contemporary political thought, Bennington points to the fact that: "this liminal position of *parrhēsia*, on the border of philosophy and rhetoric (and thereby also, as we shall see, on the border of philosophy and politics), is what makes it so fascinating for Foucault but also so difficult for him to deal with directly" (17). According to Bennington, Foucault's failure takes place in his very attempt to introduce a distinction between "good" and "bad" *parrhēsia* that would prevent the possibility of false or insincere speech. Bennington's reading, then, challenges this division by demonstrating how the "politics of politics"—and the analogous phrase, "rhetoric of rhetoric"—introduces an undecidability that is "always-already" [*Immer schon*] at play in politics or truth. Following Bennington's text, the Foucauldian project—and other projects like it that seek to discern a "true" realm of speech or politics from the "fake" one—is condemned to erase politics *as such*, which, in this case, is nothing other than the "politics of politics". As Bennington points out, Foucault's "position is philosophically difficult to sustain and politically unhelpful and . . . the image of the solitary philosopher courageously telling truth to power is part of the problem rather than its solution" (44). Given these circumstances, he turns to a reading of Heidegger in order to provide another account of the relationship between politics, philosophy, and truth.

In Bennington's reading of Heidegger, he identifies the latter's concerns with *pseudos* and its seemingly inextricable relation with *alētheia* as a site in which undecidability is introduced. For readers of Heidegger's other writings, this reading seems quite plausible, especially given his understanding of *errancy*, which is not seen as an incidental moment but a constitutive one. Placing Heidegger in contradistinction to Foucault is highly relevant since it is only with the former that one comes to the realization "that philosophy is not rigorously separable from rhetoric, nor thereby from sophistry and politics" (69). In other words, the project of separating a "true" speech from a "false" one is rendered untenable insofar as there is no recognition of the manner in which the undecidability of truth reconfigures the very relationality amongst these domains of thought. For Bennington, then, Heidegger's thought allows us to think the politicity of politics in a non-moralistic and non-dogmatic manner. At this point, Bennington illustrates his reading of Heidegger through Nancy's careful reading of the latter in "La décision de l'existence". In this text, Nancy provides ample evidence that would reveal why, for structural reasons, Heidegger's thought cannot produce or derive an ethics or politics, namely, because the very possibility of derivation is thrown into question with the undecidability of truth. In the aftermath of this solicitation, the space left open by Heidegger seems to lead us to *decision*.

In turning to the explicit theme of decision, Bennington follows his careful reading of Nancy. Perhaps the most important consequence of thinking decision through the undecidability of truth is that, as Bennington notes, any kind of thought based on the derivation of the decision according to a particular set of values, models or ends is rendered impossible. By deconstructing any kind of alibi for the decision, the undecidability of truth exposes us to the very singularity of the decision we are—one that overwhelms all pre-established rules for deciding. While the entire question of Heidegger's understanding of *Entschlossenheit* is at stake here, Bennington will re-introduce the notion of *scatter*, especially for the way in which it can deactivate the former's relentless attempts to return everything to an initial gathering. However, Bennington is quite clear that the affirmation of scatter is not the thought of pure difference to that of gathering; rather, scatter, given the mortal condition, is always *somewhat* gathered, but it does not abide by any pre-established *telos* (249). By offering a countermovement to the notion of gathering, scatter reminds us that the notion of the undecidable "seems at the very least to involve an opening or exposure to something in the decision that is not *my* decision but that comes to me from elsewhere" (163).

The *Moment*—*Augenblick*—seems to offer an important focal point in understanding the relationship between politics and philosophy. For scatter always interrupts the attempt at gathering the conditions of decision on

any teleological or *a priori* foundation or principle. In other words, Bennington's understanding of *scatter* brings us back to the decision *qua* decision. In this sense, Bennington forcefully claims, "what I call "the politics of politics" is a name for the persistence of the political in the face of all the attempted philosophical resolutions of it" (241). The "politics of politics", then, signals a break with the metaphysical concept of politics in its eschatological and teleological deployments. In this opening, deconstruction appears as the affirmation of that which is still "to come" [*à-venir*], that is, an affirmation of the scatter of moments, *eskhata* without *telos*, *kairoi* without a grand design of history (243). This affirmation of dispersion and spectrality (i.e. *différance*), as Bennington will point out, is an affirmation that leads us in a more *democratic* direction. Here we see how the very notion of scatter is related to the question of democracy.

The multiplicity of multiplicity—the Platonic *poikilon*—that appears through scatter is precisely that excess or surplus of truth that seems difficult to master or encapsulate conceptually, but is essential to any democratic thought worthy of its name. In this sense, the thought of scatter appears as a solicitation of the very structures of thought to the point that, as Bennington points out, thought is able to no longer rely on absolutes, fulfillments or *telois* and arrives to a deconstruction of philosophy that is able to think scatter (247-8). In other words, to take seriously the deconstructive solicitation introduced by scatter and the "politics of politics" is to discern the irruption of another kind of thinking that abandons the very defining characteristics of philosophy as it has developed historically. It seems that here Bennington gets extremely close to an *infrapolitical* thought—another thought of politics where politics *qua* politics is interrupted in its teleological and eschatological closure of politics into existence, subsuming the latter into the former. Infrapolitics and the thought of scatter introduce the crucial countermovement that refuses this subsumption and opens politics up to another kind of thinking—nonteleological and non-eschatological.

In offering some sort of tentative closure to my scattered reading of Bennington's important text, one can only hope for a further development of the question of democracy in *Scatter 2*. For, as we noted throughout the text, what is at stake in the very notion of scatter is nothing other than a retrieval of the significance of democracy as the relevant question for political thinking today. Throughout the history of political thought, it seems that democracy has remained unread as an *event*—especially, as Bennington points out, as an event *worthy of its name* [*digne de le nom*]. A reading of scatter and democracy is what has been promised to us in the following volume. In the meantime, the present reading tried to develop a kind of reading *worthy of its name*. But, perhaps more than that, it involved a kind of "passive decision"—one in which the very impetus of scatter and democracy have been affirmed, if only silently, as the possible horizon for a political thinking "to come" [*à-venir*].