Title

The Politics of the Third Person: Esposito's *Third Person* and Rancière's *Disagreement*

Abstract

Against the enthusiasm for dialogue and deliberation in recent democratic theory, the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito and French philosopher Jacques Rancière construct their political philosophies around the non-dialogical figure of the third person. The strikingly different deployments of the figure of the third person offered by Esposito and Rancière present a crystallization of their respective approaches to political philosophy. In this essay, the divergent analyses of the third person offered by these two thinkers are considered in terms of the critical strategies they employ. Contrasting Esposito's strategy of "ethical dissensus" with Rancière's strategy of "aesthetic dissensus", it is argued that Esposito's attempts to recruit the figure of the third person to dismantle the *dispositif* of the person are politically (if not philosophically) problematic, while Rancière's alternative account of the third person is more promising for political theory and practice.

Key words

the third person, the impersonal, dissensus, democracy, the political subject

Political philosophers have given considerable attention in recent decades to the role that dialogue and deliberation can and should play in a democratic society.[1] Public deliberation has come to be seen by many democratic theorists as the touchstone of democratic legitimacy and as a vital antidote to the tokenism of periodic voting and the proceduralism of majority rule. It is commonly argued, for instance, that policies and laws that pass through the "sluice" of public communication (Habermas) and are subjected to the rigours of critical debate prove their epistemic and democratic credentials in an exemplary fashion.

Against this tide of enthusiasm for dialogue and deliberation in recent democratic theory, the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito and French philosopher Jacques Rancière construct their political theories around the non-dialogical figure of the third person. In this essay, I propose to trace the analyses offered by these two thinkers and to show how in each case the third person is supposed to underwrite a disruptive politics that challenges the presuppositions of the dialogical or deliberative paradigm. However, Esposito and Rancière present us with two strikingly different deployments of the figure of the third person and therefore offer divergent approaches to political theory. It is not possible to provide a thorough evaluation and comparison of their respective political philosophies in this essay.[2] But I do aim to examine in detail the character of their disagreement over the figure of the third person and on this basis to offer a tentative evaluation of their competing prescriptions for emancipatory politics.

The first two sections of this essay introduce Esposito's critique of "the *dispositif* of the person" (I) and his philosophy of the impersonal (II). The third and fourth sections aim to demonstrate that Esposito's philosophical project is an instance of what Rancière calls the *ethical* configuration of dissensus (III), and to show why such an approach might be politically problematic (IV). In the remaining sections of the essay, I examine Rancière's critique of the regime of dialogue (V) and argue that his *aesthetic* form of political dissensus, with its distinctive invocation of the third person (VI), gives articulation to a form of democratic subjectivation that is more promising than Esposito's account for the project of emancipatory politics (VII).

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[1] The author would like to acknowledge the support provided by the Marsden Fund Council from Government funding, administered by the Royal Society of New Zealand.

[2] For one attempt to go further than the present effort in comparing their philosophical commitments, see Bruno Bosteels, "Politics, Infrapolitics, and the Impolitical: Notes on the Thought of Roberto Esposito and Alberto Moreiras," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 10(2) (2010): 205–238.

I. The regime of human rights and the *dispositif* of the person

Esposito and Rancière share a critical stance towards the dominant liberal tradition. Both thinkers are inheritors of a broadly Foucauldian suspicion towards the regime of human rights and emphasize in different ways the problematic biopolitical uses to which appeals to human rights have been and are being put.

For his part, Rancière highlights the way in which the language of human rights has been successfully mobilized within humanitarian discourse for the purpose of legitimating intervention on behalf of the lives of others.[3] He emphasizes that when intervention on behalf of others is undertaken it serves to extend sovereign power beyond existing jurisdictional limits. The result, he claims, has been to enhance the power not of the rights-bearers but of the intervening powers. In this way, human rights have been usurped as a political tool, and those in a situation of "bare life" have seen their "right to have rights" amount to nothing more than the right to be the object of intervention. The challenge for the poor, then, is to find ways to reactivate the *subjectifying* potential of human rights and to render them *politically* effective. Rancière offers an intriguing analysis of how this has been and can be achieved, and we shall return to consider his analysis below.

Esposito's critical focus is quite different. In his book *Third Person*, he asserts that "if the phrase ['human rights'] was intended to signal the inclusion of all human life within the protective space of the law, we are forced to admit that no right is less guaranteed today than the right to life."[4] We are not told what evidence there is for this bold claim.[5] We are only told that the blame for the failure lies with the concept of *the person*.

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[3] Jacques Rancière, "Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103(2/3) (2004): 297–310.

[4] Roberto Esposito, *Third Person: Politics of Life and Philosophy of the Impersonal*, Zakiya Hanafi (trans.) (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 4. For a synopsis, see Roberto Esposito, "For a Philosophy of the Impersonal," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 10(2) (2010): 121–34; retranslated and reprinted as "Towards a Philosophy of the Impersonal" in Roberto Espositio, *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics*, Rhiannon Noel Welch (trans.) (Fordham University Press, 2013), 112–22.

[5] The claim is repeated in Roberto Esposito, "The *Dispositif* of the Person," *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 8(1) (2012): 18: "A mere glance at today's statistics, read both in absolute and relative terms, of those who die every day because of famine, sickness, and war, seemingly gives the lie to the very pronouncement of a right to life." Esposito

The category of personhood is supposed to have provided the conceptual foundation for the discourse of human rights in the post-War era by bridging the gap between the individual qua citizen of a state (a non-universal category but a bearer of rights) and the individual qua human being (a universal category but not a bearer of rights).[6] But Esposito contends that

> the essential failure of human rights, their inability to restore the broken connection between rights and life, does not take place in spite of the affirmation of the ideology of the person but rather *because* of it. In other words, the failure of human rights is not to be conceptually traced to the limited extension of the ideology of the person but rather to its expansion; not to the fact that we have yet to enter fully into its regime of meaning, but to the fact that we have never really moved out of it.[7]

To establish this thesis is the task of the first two chapters of Esposito's book. To this end, the reader is led through a potted history of "the *dispositif* of the person" spanning from Roman law to contemporary debates in bioethics.[8]

Many elements of the narrative are familiar. For instance, Chapter Two of *Third Person* ("Person, Human, Thing") rehearses the well-known story that connects the juridical concept of person developed under Roman law (via the Greek theatre); the theological concept of the person

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makes clear that his concern is not for those in places where the right to life has yet to be proclaimed; rather, it is a concern about the effects that the so-called right to life has in territories where it is already in force. However, it is not at all clear that today's statistics support his negative assessment, even at a glance. Statistically speaking, international development and public health initiatives since WWII have led to many improvements in health and well-being globally, as is well documented by the World Health Organization. Similarly, recent studies such as Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of our Nature* (New York: Viking, 2011) suggest that modern institutions, including the regime of human rights, have had remarkable success in reducing the prevalence of violence worldwide. At very least, Esposito would have to admit that the picture is more mixed than he suggests.

[6] The classic formulation of the problem in these terms is usually attributed to Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1951).

[7] Esposito, *Third Person*, 5.

[8] Esposito acknowledges the Foucauldian provenance of the term "dispositif" and he uses the term in a way that is supposed to chime with Foucault's and Deleuze's usage, meaning roughly an apparatus or device of ordering and/or governing. However, Esposito distances himself somewhat from Agamben's recent appropriations of the term. See "The *Dispositif* of the Person," 20ff.

articulated to the Christian doctrine of the trinity; the reintegration of these Roman and Christian elements in the distinctively modern conception of the person as the bearer of subjective rights (via Hobbes and the French revolution); the formulation of the post-war consensus represented by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and exemplified by Jacques Maritain's Christian personalism; and, finally, the contemporary liberal conception of the person as a property owner with rights over his or her body (via Locke and Mill).[9] For Esposito, each of these variations is unified by a common structure, "the *dispositif* of the person," which both *identifies* the person with materiality or its body and *elevates* the person *above* materiality or its body as the sovereign subject who has the right to dispose absolutely over its possessions or its body. In each case, the *dispositif* of the person plays the same basic role and produces the same basic effect:

> That role is precisely to divide a living being into two natures made up of different qualities—the one subjugated to the mastery of the other—and thus to create subjectivity through a process of subjection or objectivization. Person makes a part of a body subject to another part to the degree in which person makes the latter the subject of the former.[10]

By virtue of this structure, the very concept of personhood, while ostensibly ensuring the connection of rights to human life, inevitably produces a reifying effect that separates out the rights-bearer from the "material support" of human life, thereby legitimating the subjection of the latter to the former.

The stakes involved in this radical critique of the *dispositif* of the person are raised even higher by the argument presented in Chapter One of *Third Person* ("The Double Life: The Machine of the Human Sciences"). In this Chapter, Esposito traces the intellectual genealogy that leads to the biopolitical outlook of National Socialism. The reader is guided through the early nineteenth-century revolution in biology and physiology (Bichat) via the reformulation of anthropology and linguistics in quasi-evolutionary terms in the mid nineteenth century (Schleicher, Gobineau, Haeckel) to the intellectual champions of Nazism (Günther). In a surprising turn, however, Esposito maintains that these intellectual positions are nothing other than further variations on the theme of the *dispositif* of the person. Just as liberal rights discourse and Maritain's personalism accomplish a

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[9] The intellectual history covered in this chapter of *Third Person* is rehearsed again in Esposito, "The *Dispositif* of the Person," 17–30.

[10] Esposito, "The *Dispositif* of the Person," 21.

"spiritualistic personalization of the body" by *drawing a line* between the transcendence of the rational soul and the irrational body with its passions, so Nazism accomplishes a "biopolitical corporealization of the person" by *drawing a line* between the humanizing accomplishments of the Arian race and deviants or inferiors (the Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals). The biopolitics of National Socialism, far from eschewing the concept of the person, simply gives the exceptionalism inherent to the category of personhood a biological and phylogenetic spin. The true human being, worthy of the legal dignity of personhood, is not abolished; it is simply identified with the purebred specimen of the Arian race. As the rights-bearer is to the "material support" of its human life, so the Arian race is to the mass of human inferiors. Other lesser races are thus legitimately subjugated in order to fulfil the higher destiny of the Arian race, just as the body is legitimately made the servant of the rational soul.

In short, while the assertion of human dignity in the legal form of *human rights* in the post-War context was intended to stand as a decisive rejection of the dehumanizing ideology of National Socialism, Esposito sees a hidden affinity, a coincidence of opposites, between these supposedly antithetical ideologies.[11] The philosophical anthropologies in play are "inscribed inside the same theoretical circle" patterned on the traditional Aristotelian definition of the human being as the rational animal, which *draws a line* between human and animal, rationality and materiality, legal personality and bare life.[12] We can have no confidence, therefore, that the expansion of "the ideology of the person" will offer protection to the dignity of human beings. The regime of human rights must be opposed by a more radical politics of life.

II. The third person in Esposito

After the critical-historical analysis of Chapters One and Two, in Chapter Three of *Third Person* Esposito assembles some "figures" or "segments" drawn from twentieth century philosophical thinking to contribute toward what he describes as an "affirmative biopolitics".[13] As the overarching rubric for this third and final chapter, Esposito selects the figure of the third person. This may seem a strange choice given the anti-personalist tenor of the work. But, according to Esposito, the third person is a figure that, without annihilating it, opens the concept of the person to an "estrangement" and to "a set of forces that push it beyond its logical, and even grammatical boundaries."[14]

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[11] Simone Weil is clearly the inspiration for this bold thesis, as Esposito himself acknowledges in "The *Dispositif* of the Person," 28–30.

[12] Esposito, *Third Person*, 12.

[13] Esposito, *Third Person*, 18.

Esposito appeals to Émile Benveniste's famous studies of personal pronouns to explain the strategic value of the figure of the third person.[15] Benveniste's studies emphasize the distinctive linguistic function played by third person pronouns over against first and second person pronouns.[16] In contrast to the "specificity" of the first and second person, which fix and mark out participants in "the dialogical regime of interlocution" as those who interpellate each other in the face-to-face of reciprocal spoken address, the third person is released from the presuppositions of presence, address, and reversibility "to the point where it can be defined as a 'non-person'."[17] Benveniste thus considers the third person to be "impersonal," fully decoupled from the category of personhood. He writes:

> The 'third person' must not […] be imagined as a person suited to depersonalization. There is no apheresis of the person; it is exactly the non-person, which possesses as its sign the absence of that which specifically qualifies the 'I' and the 'you'. Because it does not imply any person, it can take any subject whatsoever or no subject, and this subject, expressed or not, is never posited as a 'person'.[18]

Thus the third person provides Esposito with a suitable term by which to break out of the fixity of the I-Thou relationship with its unavoidable presuppositions of unicity, presence and reversibility.[19]

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[14] Esposito, *Third Person*, 14.

[15] Émile Benveniste, "The Relationships of Person in the Verb (1946)" and "The Nature of Pronouns (1956)" in *Problems in General Linguistics*, Mary Elizabeth Meek (trans.) (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), 195–204, 217–222.

[16] The basic distinctions made by Benveniste are prefigured by Wilhelm von Humboldt. See Wilhelm von Humboldt, "On the Dual Form [1828]," in *Essays on Language*, T. Harden and D. Farrelly (eds.) (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997), 111–36.

[17] Esposito, *Third Person*, 15.

[18] Benveniste, "Relationships of Person in the Verb," 199–200.

[19] For Esposito, Benvenite's analyses straightaway expose a certain deficiency in all philosophies of the I-Thou, from Martin Buber to Vladimir Jankélévitch. For these thinkers, the moral authenticity of a given relationship can be evaluated by measuring its proximity to the living present of attentive and open dialogue between I and Thou. However, following Benveniste's analysis, Esposito argues that the second person is nothing other than a duplication or projection

But what philosophical and political content can or should be given to this "impersonal" category of the third person? In the main body of Chapter Three, Esposito surveys and evaluates a variety of disparate responses to this question. They fall into two clear groups.

For the first group, consisting of Alexandre Kojève, Vladimir Jankélévitch and Emmanuel Levinas, the figure of the third is a figure of the impartiality or neutrality of law: "the third person is what hails the advent of a law that can finally be translated into justice."[20] The contributions of this group are ambiguous from Esposito's perspective, since they reach an aporia in the need to reconcile the responsibility that binds the first and second person in the face-to-face encounter with the demands of universal justice. The responsibility of *love*, as Esposito shows through via analysis of Jankélévitch,[21] is at odds with the demands of *justice*, whose outlines are explored via analysis of Kojève's *Outline of a Phenomenology of Right*.[22] By giving ourselves over entirely to the needs of the other we betray the demands of justice by doing violence to the third; but by fulfilling the demands of justice, we betray our responsibility to attend to the other's needs. To honour one obligation is to betray the other.

It is, of course, in Levinas's complex reflections on the third that we find the most sophisticated attempt to resolve this dilemma. Esposito traces the twists and turns of Levinas's thought as he wrestles with it over the course of his career, from the early phase in which the third is located (as "illeity") at the ground of the "diachronic" relation to the other, to the later phase in which the third

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of the first person: "… regardless of the mode of relationship said to exist between the two – direct or reversed, frontal or oblique, horizontal or vertical – the *you* only takes on meaning from the *I* that interpellates it, whether in the form of a command, an invocation, or a prayer. The 'two' is necessarily inscribed in the logic of the 'one', just as 'one' always tends to split into 'two' in order to be able to mirror and recognize itself in its human or divine interlocutor" (Esposito, *Third Person*, 15, cf. 105.) For this reason, Esposito argues that philosophies of the second person never truly depart from the subjectivism of the modern tradition. Hence it is only under the rubric of the third person, and not the second person, that one can think beyond the personalist paradigm with its subjectivist presuppositions. (In addition to the Levinasian line of argument just described, we can identify in Esposito a second line of criticism that is indebted to Sartre's phenomenology of 'the look': "Since only one can occupy it – the one who calls itself *I* – the subjectivization of the first term automatically desubjectifies the second, until such time as it acquires subjectivity in its turn by desubjectivizing the first" (106). It could be questioned whether the two lines of argument are strictly compatible.)

[20] Esposito, *Third Person*, 16.

[21] Esposito, *Third Person*, 115–19.

[22] Esposito, *Third Person*, 109–14.

is emphatically the third party, the other's other, who introduces the troubling "contemporaneousness of the multiple."[23] Levinas is lauded for being awake to the dilemma and for refusing to collapse the third into the second or the second into the third. But none of his efforts ultimately succeeds in resolving the "basic conflict," according to Esposito. Indeed, he believes they are *destined* to fail on account of "the irreducibility of a ternary logic to a binary one":[24]

> It is not sufficient to expand or vertically extend the dyadic order in order to obtain a triadic one. The lexicons associated with them are as incompatible as those of the line and the circle. Nor does it suffice to say, as Levinas does, that justice limits the absolute ethics of responsibility in the same way in which responsibility moderates the universality of law. In actuality, neither can be expressed without contradicting the other: neither can be brought to fulfilment without at the same time negating the other.[25]

How then does Esposito propose to break this impasse? He suggests that only a "lateral move" into a discourse that radically breaks with the dialogical structure of the I-Thou relationship can inaugurate a coherent conception of justice.[26] But to make such a move, he asserts, we will have to fully embrace the *neutrality* of justice and take our lead from "the neutral" with its radically egalitarian structure, which Esposito characterizes in terms of "a crosswise gaze on that 'anyone' or 'anyone at all' in which a truly third person can be reflected on its originary impersonal ground."[27]

Esposito finds such a position already sketched in Simone Weil's seminal writings,[28] but he seeks to develop and radicalize her position by drawing on a second group of thinkers who more radically subvert the concept of the person by refiguring it in the direction of "the neuter" (Blanchot), "the outside" (Foucault), and "the event" (Deleuze). A politics of the impersonal emerges out of this philosophical tradition, we are told, because its deconstructive procedures give birth to an anonymous, depersonalized third person in us that "strips us of the power to say 'I' (Blanchot's 'neuter')".[29] A passage from Deleuze illustrates the basic thought:

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[23] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Alphonso Lingis (trans.) (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1978), 159. Esposito calls these respectively the "interior third" and the "exterior third" (*Third Person*, 123).

[24] Esposito, *Third Person*, 16.

[25] Esposito, *Third Person*, 124.

[26] Esposito, *Third Person*, 126.

[27] Esposito, *Third Person*, 125.

[28] Esposito, *Third Person*, 100–103.

> Blanchot is correct in saying that ONE and HE—*one* is dying, *he* is unhappy—in no way take the place of a subject, but instead do away with any subject in favor of an assemblage of the haecceity type that carries or brings out the event insofar as it is unformed or incapable of being effectuated by persons ("something happens to them that they can only get a grip on again by letting go of their ability to say I"). The HE does not represent a subject but rather makes a diagram of an assemblage. It does not overcode statements, it does not transcend them as do the first two persons; on the contrary, it prevents them from falling under the tyranny of subjective or signifying constellations, under the regime of empty redundancies.[30]

The third person as *one* or *he* points towards a philosophy of life that has systematically dismantled the category of the person through "a logic that privileges multiplicity and contamination over identity and discrimination."[31]

For Esposito, this is a logic epitomized by Deleuze's concept of *becoming animal*, which he understands as a return to our "natural alteration":

> What we are talking about is not humankind's *alter*, or the *alter* in humankind, but rather humankind brought back to its natural alteration. The animal—in the human, of the human—means above all multiplicity, plurality, assemblage with what surrounds us and with what always dwells inside us.[32]

Esposito argues that the subject returned to its "natural alteration" is a liberated subject because it has loosened itself from the *dispositif* of the person, a *dispositif* which, from Roman antiquity to the present, he takes to have been part of "an entire mechanism of social discipline, which works specifically by continuously shifting the categorical thresholds that define, or create, the status of all living being".[33] And it is with this suggestive motif of becoming animal that Esposito's book concludes.

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[29] Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Clinical and Critical*, Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (trans.) (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 3. Quoted in Esposito, *Third Person*, 145.

[30] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Brian Massumi (trans.) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 265.

[31] Esposito, *Third Person*, 145.

[32] Esposito, *Third Person*, 150.

III. Esposito's philosophy of the impersonal as ethical dissensus

How are we to evaluate Esposito's critique of the *dispositif* of the person and his affirmative biopolitics? It will be useful first to consider the methodological strategy of Esposito's work. The first general point to make here is that Esposito practices what Rancière has called a *dissensual* mode of philosophy. Rancière defines "dissensus" as follows: "a dissensus is not a conflict; it is a perturbation of the normal relation between sense and sense."[34] That is to say, a dissensus is a disruption of accepted ways of making sense (*sens*) of what is given in the world around us (*sens*), a disruption of the ways of being, acting and speaking that we take to be appropriate and normal in given contexts and that lend coherence and order to our world.[35]

In the opening remarks of his essay on the *dispositif* of the person, Esposito makes clear the dissensual ambitions of his work: "If the point of philosophical reflection is to critically dismantle contemporary opinion, to radically interrogate what is presented as immediately clear to all, then there are few concepts so in need of dismantling as that of 'person'."[36] Similarly, in Chapter Three of *Third Person*, the "figures" or "segments" assembled by Esposito are said to present "lines of resistance" towards the *dispositif* of the person, "cut[ting] through its territory, thus preventing, or at least opposing, the functioning of its exclusionary dispositif."[37] By assembling these "figures" or "segments" the text aims to disrupt the normal relations between what is given, i.e. *life*, and the way in which it is rendered intelligible, i.e. being conceptually divided into *rights bearers* and their *material support*.

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[33] Esposito, *Third Person*, 9.

[34] Jacques Rancière, "The Aesthetic Dimension: Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge," *Critical Inquiry* 36 (2009): 3.

[35] The more familiar term for this concept in Rancière's writings is "the distribution of the sensible" (*le partage du sensible*), which he defines as follows: "A distribution of the sensible is a matrix that defines a set of relations between sense and sense: that is, between a form of sensory experience and an interpretation which makes sense of it." Jacques Rancière, "The Method of Equality: An Answer to Some Questions," in *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, G. Rockhill and P. Watts (eds.) (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 275.

[36] Esposito, "The *Dispositif* of the Person," 17.

[37] Esposito, *Third Person*, 14.

But let us now try to be more precise. What mode of dissensus is being employed here? Rancière distinguishes two modes or configurations of dissensus—the ethical and the aesthetic—and, as we shall see, this distinction proves to be a useful heuristic device for analysing Esposito's method and contrasting it with Rancière's.

In the *ethical* configuration of dissensus, the "perturbation of the normal relation between sense and sense" is achieved through the invocation of the law of the Other, the Thing, the sublime or some other figure of excess. It is by appeal to such figures of radical incomprehensibility that the critical theorist aims to disturb the assumptions of rational coherence and legitimacy that prop up the normal relation between sense and sense, with the aim of weakening structures of domination or injustice. As instances of this ethical configuration of dissensus, Rancière gestures towards the work of thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Jacques Derrida.

The *aesthetic* configuration of dissensus, by contrast, rejects the invocation of the radical Other and its deconstructive potential. Instead, it locates emancipatory potential in the assumption that it is always possible to *slacken* the normal relation between sense and sense, and to adopt *other ways* of seeing, acting and speaking. Rancière calls the appearance in the world of a subject who sees, acts and speaks according to another set of possibilities an "aesthetic rupture".[38] The accomplishment of this aesthetic subject is to introduce another "as if" into the social field which reconfigures the "as if" of the governing order.

> The aesthetic dimension […] dismisses both the inner law of distribution and the law of an immeasurable outside. […] In opposition to that distribution, the general form of the aesthetic configuration could be described that is not the Other, the immeasurable, but rather the redistribution of the same and the different, the division of the same and the dismissal of difference.[39]

What Rancière has in mind when he refers to "the division of the same and the dismissal of difference" is something we shall consider in more detail below. For the moment, we should simply note the contrast he draws between the ethical and the aesthetic modes of dissensus. As we shall see presently, Esposito's critique of the *dispositif* of the person and his philosophy of the impersonal can be categorised as an instance of ethical dissensus.

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[38] Rancière, "The Aesthetic Dimension," 8.

[39] Rancière, "The Aesthetic Dimension," 5.

In each moment of the analysis of the history of the *dispositif* of the person, Esposito notes (i) the fact that the concept of the person is supposed to name that which is common to all and constitutive of human community, and (ii) the way in which the concept functions to divide the rights bearer from its material support. He argues that these two aspects of the *dispositif* are mutually constitutive:

> It is thanks to the category of person that human beings are unified in the form of their separation. Two elements—unity and separation—are held together and cannot be separated. [...] unification and universalization logically presuppose separation.[40]

For Rancière, the structure of unification-and-separation is a characteristic feature of every "ethical" order of meaning, or distribution of the sensible (*le partage du sensible*), by which he means roughly any shared lifeworld. He labels these two moments of unification and separation the "ethical universal" and the "ethical principle of discrimination" respectively.[41] Taken together they describe the "law of the inside" of any ethical community: the law of the common and of its distribution.[42] There should be no dispute, then, between Esposito and Rancière at the level of the analysis of the unifying-separating function of the *dispositif* of the person. Esposito's analysis of the universalizing and separating moments of the *dispositif* of the person simply identifies an instance of the "ethical" structure that Rancière describes. But how does Esposito portray this "ethical consensus" and what is his strategy to oppose it?

First, how does Esposito portray the ethical consensus constituted by the *dispositif* of the person? He presents his analysis of the unifying-separating configuration of the *dispositif* of the person as an *exposé* that reveals a hidden truth. What is the secret that it reveals? On the one hand, that "it isn't possible to personalize someone without depersonalizing or reifying others, without pushing someone over into the indefinite space that opens like a kind of trap door below the person."[43] On the other hand, that the legal concept of personhood and the regime of human rights are an extension of a logic of *immunity*, a logic of exemption from the duties and responsibilities of common life.[44] In this way, the critique is presented as an unmasking of the *real* meaning of the *dispositif* of the person: i.e. the revelation of its dehumanizing and immunizing effects. Esposito's interpretative procedure in this respect is reminiscent of the hermeneutics of suspicion practiced by Marx or Bourdieu.[45]

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[40] Esposito, "The *Dispositif* of the Person," 22f.

[41] Rancière, "The Aesthetic Dimension," 4.

[42] Rancière, "The Aesthetic Dimension," 4.

[43] Esposito, "The *Dispositif* of the Person," 24.

Second, what is Esposito's strategy to oppose this ethical consensus? As we have already seen, he confronts the apparatus of inclusion/exclusion with the figure of the *impersonal*—variously interpreted as the *outside*, the *neuter*, the *event*, or the *third person*—which is supposed to name and affirm the reality denied by the legal fiction of personhood. More specifically, the impersonal in its various guises is supposed to name the irreducible and untameable outside of the *dispositif* of the person—not that which is excluded by it, but that which is *heteronomous* to its whole apparatus of exclusion/inclusion and which undermines or deconstructs its regime of meaning.[46] The thinking that is oriented by the distinction between persons and non-persons must give way in the face of this more basic 'truth' to which it is incommensurable. For Esposito, specifically, it is the ontological primacy of the impersonal that is supposed to interrupt and overturn the regime of meaning determined by the concept of the person, without establishing some new configuration of meaning into which biopolitical thinking could settle. To this extent, the concept of the impersonal articulates what Rancière calls a "law of the outside": i.e. a "figure of the immeasureable or the unsubstitutable from which all that is measureable or substitutable, connected according to the law of distribution, has to take its law at the risk of being cancelled by it."[47]

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[44] The concepts of immunity and community are developed in two books: Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, Timothy Campbell (trans.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, Zakiya Hanafi (trans.) (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

[45] This is a stance towards the political that Rancière elsewhere calls *metapolitics*. See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, J. Rose (trans.) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 81–93.

[46] Bosteels identifies a similar structure in Esposito's notion of the *impolitical*, which names "the constitutive outside of politics." However, Bosteels rightly notes the paradoxical nature of this "outside," which is an "immanent transcending" and "cannot be seen as yet another value, external to political valorization, because there is neither an interior nor a safe exterior to politics from which the latter might be accomplished or criticized" ("Politics, Infrapolitics, and the Impolitical," 222).

[47] Rancière, "The Aesthetic Dimension," 4f.

In view of this analysis, we can conclude that Esposito's philosophical position exemplifies the full set of relations that Rancière calls "ethical legality": (i) the rule of the common ethos, (ii) the rule of the distribution of the alternative parts, and (iii) the power of the monster that is outside of the rule.[48] To this extent, although it differs in a variety of ways from Bourdieu's sociology of knowledge, Lyotard's interpretation of the Kantian sublime, or Derrida's democracy-to-come, Esposito's impersonalism can be seen to be homologous with them at a formal level.[49] It is a variety of *ethical dissensus*.

IV. The inadequacy of Esposito's strategy of ethical dissensus

But Rancière argues that the formal strategy of ethical dissensus is politically problematic. His argument can be rehearsed most succinctly in connection with Lyotard. For Lyotard, the law of the outside is located in the experience of *the sublime*, in which the mind is exposed to the unfathomable and unsettling shock of the sensuous.[50] The shock, as Lyotard understands it, amounts to the realization that there simply is no common measure between thought and sensation (i.e. sense and sense). This incommensurability is then supposed to set in motion a deconstructive unmasking of the illusions of universality, reason, and understanding, and thus to radically undermine the autonomy of the subject. In the wake of its self-devastation, philosophy is given over to the "modest" task of atoning for the wrongs perpetrated by politics and thought against the Other under the reign of enlightenment rationalism.

If Lyotard's brand of ethical dissensus is politically problematic for Rancière, it is because it inflates the "wrong" against the Other into an *absolute* in the face of which political speech and action are impotent. Lyotard's law of the sublime, Rancière claims, "tars all thought and all politics with its own impotence by making itself the custodian of the thought of a catastrophe from which no ethics, in any case, was able to protect us."[51] To this extent, his "modest" philosophy of mourning *invalidates* the political struggles of victims past and future by casting such struggles as hopeless and illusory. To which Rancière wryly responds: "We should make sure that the modesty of philosophy is not also modesty at someone else's expense..."[52]

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[48] Rancière, "The Aesthetic Dimension," 5.

[49] Confusingly, Esposito appears to retreat from the boldly deconstructive tenor of *Third Person* in his subsequent synopsis article when he writes: "Let me add at once that I don't intend it as a negation of what many see as noble, just, and worthy in the term *person*. On the contrary, I would like to assign the term *person* value and render it more effective" ("Towards a Philosophy of the Impersonal," 118). In the same piece, however, he speaks approvingly of the "deconstruction of the paradigm of the person" that we find in Foucault and Deleuze (121). It is unclear how these two statements are to be reconciled.

[50] See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, G. Bennington and R. Bowlby (trans.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 135–43.

If it is true that Esposito's philosophy of the impersonal shares the same formal structure as Lyotard's law of the sublime, then we might expect that it will suffer from similar problematic political implications. And, sure enough, readers of Esposito have charged him with the same kinds of failings. For instance, Jonathan Short worries that "what Esposito calls 'alteration' is a purely deconstructive force, something that simply *undoes*, brings to ruin existing political categories without being able to propose new ones."[53] He continues:

> … it is unclear what kind of affirmation Esposito's affirmative biopolitics – and for that matter his strategies of the impersonal and impolitical – might yield, aside from an unstructured, unlimited affirmation of an ontological "drift" that complicates but never poses an alternative to existing forms of authoritarian community.[54]

Similarly, Bruno Bosteels has argued that by rejecting the notion of political subjectivity and turning instead to an 'impolitical' thinking of the finitude of politics, Esposito finds himself taking "a decision in favour of passivity or inaction."[55] In an era of dwindling prospects for effective political action, it is perhaps understandable that he is tempted to substitute philosophical critique for revolutionary politics. But, argues Bosteels, "what such a substitution gains in terms of philosophical radicality, it gives up in terms of political effectiveness."[56]

Peter Goodrich is even more direct in his criticism:

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[51] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 135.

[52] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 136.

[53] Jonathan Short, "On an Obligatory Nothing: Situating the Political in Post-metaphysical Community," *Angelaki* 18(3) (2013): 139.

[54] Short, "On an Obligatory Nothing," 146.

[55] Bosteels, "Politics, Infrapolitics, and the Impolitical," 237.

[56] Bosteels, "Politics, Infrapolitics, and the Impolitical," 237.

> New lexicons are invoked, surpassings and overturnings are heralded, but these are easy or essentially rhetorical solutions. They are ways of stopping thinking. […] Saying 'let's exit,' 'new words must be devised,' 'time to escape' is simply, well, no avoiding it, escapist.[57]

Extending these lines of criticisms in light of Rancière's remarks on the inadequacies of Lyotard's ethics of the sublime, we ought to consider whether Esposito's impersonalism provides any new resources for giving *political voice* to those who are depersonalized by the exclusionary *dispositif* of the person. Does it, for instance, describe or provide a mechanism by means of which those who fall down "the trap door below the person" might effect emancipatory social change? Or, does it rather ignore or efface the ways in which excluded individuals might be able to contest relationships of power?

These questions can be focused on a more precise target: Esposito's "affirmative biopolitics" lays down the law of the outside, so to speak, by confronting the *dispositif* of the person with the ostensible 'real' of the impersonal field, i.e. *becoming-animal*. But what is the *political* significance of becoming-animal? We know what Esposito would have us make of it. It signifies "above all multiplicity, plurality, assemblage with what surrounds us and with what always dwells inside us." But we also know that becoming-animal means to be treated as a nameless being lacking the capacity for speech and subject to the exploitation of others; it is a name of oppression, as Esposito's own analysis of Nazi treatment of the Jews and other war prisoners clearly illustrates.[58] So, again, what is the *political* significance of becoming-animal? Are we not forced to admit that it is at best an ambivalent and contestable notion? What's more, its political sense cannot be determined by the theorist's pronouncement; it can only be determined *politically*. That is to say, the question of the political significance of becoming-animal requires us to ask what, if any, polemical use can be made of such a pronouncement. In other words, we cannot avoid the question of *political subjectivation*. But this is a question towards which Esposito takes a deeply skeptical and deflationary attitude, as Bosteels has shown.[59]

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[57] Peter Goodrich, "The Theatre of Emblems: On the Optical Apparatus and the Investiture of Persons," *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 8(1) (2012): 67.

[58] Esposito, *Third Person*, 60-63. Rancière starkly reminds us that: "Between the language of those who have a name and the lowing of nameless beings, no situation of linguistic exchange can possibly be set up, no rules or code of discussion." Rancière, *Disagreement*, 24.

[59] See Bosteels, "Politics, Infrapolitics, and the Impolitical," 218-29.

What is enticing about Rancière's thought, by contrast, is that it promises to elaborate a mode of dissensus that not only "undoes" *dispositifs* of the kind identified by Esposito but does so without simply appealing to the law of the Other and without effacing the role of the political subject in staging dissent. It promises a mode of politics that is neither utopian nor elegiac but is rather oriented by a democratic presumption of equality. In the remainder of the essay, therefore, I turn to consider in more detail Rancière's "aesthetic" conception of dissensus and its political uses. Of particular interest for our purposes is the way he elaborates a politics of the third person in a different register than Esposito, a politics of the democratic subject who speaks and acts under the sign of equality.

V. The I-Thou relationship and the problem of political disagreement

Like Esposito, Rancière rejects the philosophical elevation of the I-Thou relationship that is characteristic of the personalist tradition. But he does so in a manner quite different from Esposito. The point at issue is treated at greatest length in a crucial chapter of the book *Disagreement*, a chapter in which Rancière seeks to take his leave from Habermas's theory of communicative action.[60] Habermas's theory privileges the I-Thou relationship between speaker and hearer who converse with one another about something in the world and submit their speech to each other's critical evaluation. This "communicative attitude," as Habermas himself insists, is only possible on the basis of a mutual recognition between speaker and hearer as rationally competent to assess the validity of each other's speech. Participants in communication "can neither understand nor misunderstand one another unless there is a presupposition of rationality."[61]

But what if such mutual recognition were suspended or never presupposed by the participants in communication? According to Habermas, the effect would be to transform the communicative attitude into an objectivating attitude.[62] The interlocutors would abandon the standpoint of participants in the game of giving and evaluating reasons and instead take up the stance of agents observing or manipulating objects.[63] For Habermas, this indicates that equality and non-coercion have as their privileged domain of actuality the vis-à-vis of communicative interaction (and of rational argumentation in particular). Outside this form of relationship there is only strategic action, whose rationality is measured in terms of efficacy in satisfying predetermined goals.

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[60] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 43-60. For a more detailed analysis of this argument, see Matheson Russell and Andrew Montin, "The Rationality of Political Disagreement: Rancière's Critique of Habermas," *Constellations* (forthcoming).

[61] Jürgen Habermas, "From Kant's 'Ideas' of Pure Reason to the 'Idealizing' Presuppositions of Communicative Action: Reflections on the Detranscentalized 'Use of Reason'" in *Truth and Justification*, B. Fultner (trans.) (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 86.

[62] See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, "Some Further Clarifications of the Concept of Communicative Rationality", in *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, B. Fultner (trans.) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 332.

In his critical rejoinder to this Habermasian conception, Rancière draws attention to everyday relationships in which the mutual presupposition of rationality does not hold and yet the parties understand themselves to be cooperating in a mutually intelligible and appropriate joint activity. He has in mind here, for instance, interactions between bosses and workers, teachers and students, parents and children. In such relationships parties do not *break* with linguistically mediated forms of social coordination simply because they do not recognize one another as peers; nor do they resort to the merely strategic use of language. On the contrary, these relationship continue to be linguistically mediated and non-strategic. In short, they proceed in a consensual fashion. (In fact, Habermas will on occasion use just such speech situations as proto-typical examples of communicative action.)

But, according to Rancière, what is excluded in such relationships, since it is assumed to be *inappropriate* from the outset, is the expectation that the speakers might engage with each other in rational argumentation as equals. If so, the linguistic interaction between them has to respect a tacit prohibition against entering into argumentative discourse, and therefore it takes on non-discursive forms such as storytelling, instruction, or command. But what does this mean for the subordinate who wishes to contest the assumption of their incapacity and inequality? Contestation of such an ethical consensus cannot occur *within* the constraints of the dialogical relation, since it is not available to the subordinate party to take up the attitude of a rational interlocutor. Taking up such an attitude could only 'count' from the perspective of the superordinate party as an act of trouble-making, arrogance, or impropriety. In this way, the consensual regime of dialogue threatens to "lock the rational argument of political debate into the same speech situation as the one it seeks to overcome."[64] Hence, according to Rancière, such an ethical consensus means that the subordinate party is given *a part that has no part*.

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[63] Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, F. G. Lawrence (trans.) (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 297.

[64] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 47.

Rancière's concern is to explore the possibility of breaking out of the I-Thou relationship that is structured in advance according to a mutual presupposition of inequality. In such situations, he claims, argumentation and political disagreement *is* possible, but it is only possible by way of a "multiplication of persons": that is, through a fracturing of the first and second person of dialogue to include subject positions and often other actual subjects who occupy third-person roles.[65]

VI. The multiplication of persons

For Rancière, politics involves a fracturing of the dialogical vis-à-vis of the second-person standpoint.[66] What does this fracturing look like? As Benveniste notes, when the grammatical third person (he, she, it, they) is employed, it normally signals that the individual or individuals referred to in the third person are not participants in that speech situation. But it is also the case that the grammatical third person can be used *within* a speech situation in a variety of ways. Strangely, this can occur in situations where etiquette requires extreme politeness ("Would Madam like her morning paper now?") or in situations where distrust or contempt is so extreme that parties refuse to address each other in the second person.[67] The latter case is nicely illustrated by Rancière using an example from Molière's play *The Miser*. The scene in question involves the coachman and the steward bitterly complaining about one another to the miser Harpagon, but doing so in each other's presence: "Master Jacques is a great talker! / And Master Steward is a great meddler!"[68] Each character hears and responds to the other's speech about them spoken to a third person. The third person of politeness flips over into a figure of contemptuousness, a substitute for dialogue which, because of the fracture in the relationship, would be unthinkable. The other is spoken *of* but also indirectly spoken *to* in the third person.

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[65] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 48.

[66] I am leaving to one side a complication in Rancière's account which is that the staging of a disagreement is also said to stage the failure of the attempt to address the other party in good faith as a second person. See Rancière, *Disagreement*, 52–55.

[67] Esposito also notes that spoken address may use the third person, which has the effect of "placing the interlocutor above [the normal status of the person], out of respect, or below it, out of contempt" (*Third person*, 108).

[68] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 47.

The multiplication of persons in the fractured speech situation can be further illustrated using Rancière's example of a union strike. Consider the workers' spokesperson who addresses the assembled workers, commentating upon the situation and speaking *about* the relationship with the bosses ("they") on behalf of the "wronged" workers ("we"). All the while the public rally is intended to send a message to the bosses; they are its indirect addressees. Conversely, when negotiations take place between the union and the employer, they are conducted by representatives who speaks *on behalf of* their party in the form of commentary on their views ("The workers will not accept…"). In both settings, by referring to the parties in the third person ("they") such speech indicates that it is not accepted that the parties can address each other directly as equals (as marked by the use of the second person pronoun). The fact that there is a fracture in the speech situation is thus unmistakably registered, and it is a symptom of the fact that the conflict concerns the very status of the speakers as speaking beings.

Nonetheless, in each of the cases described above, theatrical devices work around the impossibility of direct argumentation between first and second persons. Direct interlocution is displaced, and a third person is interposed.[69] As Rancière explains:

> In such an interchange, the "they" plays a triple role. First, it designates the other person as the one with whom not only a conflict of interests is under debate but the very situation of the speakers as speaking beings. Second, it addresses a third person at whose door it virtually lays this question. Third, it sets up the first person, the "I" or "we" of the speaker, as representative of a community. In politics, it is the set of these interactions that is meant by "public opinion".[70]

In this understanding of political speech, Habermas's dichotomy between the performative and objectivating attitudes is well and truly overcome. We are dealing here with something "both less and more" than a simple dialogue.[71] Less, because measured against the Habermasian standard of communication, the absence of the interlocutor's recognition would seem to reduce one's speech to the status of a monologue; and more, because insofar as the invocation of the third person reconfigures and multiplies the speech positions in play, communication is continued by other means.[72]

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[69] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 48.

[70] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 48.

[71] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 48.

In the scenes of interest to Rancière, the subject matter under discussion (i.e. the speech situation itself and its validity conditions) cannot be discussed *with* the other party in the speech situation because of the prevailing assumption of inequality. In such situations, participants are compelled to operate outside and against the normal constraints placed upon interlocutors oriented towards mutual understanding. For this reason, the 'objectifying' use of third person takes on a different sense in Rancière's analysis of political disagreement than it does in Habermas's analysis of rational argumentation. The third person of Rancière's analysis is the "litigious" subject who complicates the assumptions of the speech situation and upsets the exclusivity and (false) reciprocity of the I-Thou. And it is precisely at this point that his account parts ways with Habermas and other proponents of the dialogical principle (e.g. Buber, Jankélévitch).

VII. Political subjectivation

It should be evident that Rancière's "litigious" third person can in no way be equated with the "impersonal" third person of Esposito's analysis. While Esposito's third person is a figure of excess and incommensurability which "strips us of the power to say 'I'," Rancière's third person is a figure of *paradoxical subjectivation* which says "I" or "we" from a position that is both inside and outside the speech situation. But the third person of political dissensus is paradoxical in another respect as well. On Rancière's account, the political subject both *identifies with* and *dissociates itself from* its legal *persona*. That is, far from deconstructing the identity of persons or embracing a philosophy of impersonal life, Rancière insists that a *doubling* of identity is essential to political subjectivation. It is here, perhaps, that we see the sharpest point of divergence between the ethical dissensus of Esposito and the aesthetic dissensus of Rancière. Let us examine this point in more detail.

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[72] From a Habermasian point of view it could be objected that political speech and action as described by Rancière still makes use of the linguistic resources that derive from the *communicative* use of language, and that to this extent the political uses of language are derivative upon the ordinary (dialogical) patterns of linguistic interaction. What's more, the Habermasian may insist that the third-person standpoint is just as much a feature of Habermasian discourse as it is of Rancièrean disagreement, since it is implied in "the reflective point of view" that speakers take up towards *the subject matter* under discussion between them. (See Jürgen Habermas, "Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action," in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (trans.) (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), 130.) Insofar as discourse always involves a third-person standpoint in relation to that-about-which the conversation is concerned, what Rancière calls the "space of commentary" (*Disagreement*, 47) looks to be more or less synonymous with Habermas's space of "discourse". All this may be true, but it does not undermine the central point about the necessity of a "multiplication of persons" in the political speech situation.

Rancière's political subject does not seek to shed its legal *persona*, but rather *doubles* it. The "worker" adopts the polemical name of "proletarian," the "immigrant" adopts the polemical name of "Jew," the "housewife" adopts the polemical name of "citizen". Each polemical name claims an identity that cannot be mapped onto the occupations and functions of the social order, an identity that scrambles the neat categories in which the speaker had been placed and thereby disqualified from political participation. The 'improper' names adopted by the political subject invent a position from which to appear as *something more than* a "worker," "immigrant," "housewife," etc. At the same time, the adoption of 'improper' names *demonstrates* the speaker's capacity for political speech and thereby shows how the social order, which assumes the speaker's incapacity for political participation, constitutes a "wrong".

> Any [political] subjectivation is a disidentification, removal from the naturalness of a place, the opening up of a subject space where anyone can be counted since it is the space where those of no account are counted, where a connection is made between having a part and having no part. […] What is subjectified is neither work nor destitution, but the simple counting of the uncounted, the difference between an inegalitarian distribution of social bodies and the equality of speaking beings.[73]

The subject's dis-identification with its legal *persona* and its dissenting speech enact what Rancière calls an "aesthetic rupture": the appearance in the world of a subject who sees, acts and speaks according to another set of possibilities.[74] The critical purchase of this rupture, however, does not come from the identification of some impossible supplement outside the "normal relation of sense and sense" but from the construction of another way of seeing and doing—another "as if".[75] As Goodrich observes in his critique of Esposito: "The antithesis, finally, both historically and theoretically, is that between *persona* and *histrio*, actor and player, *homo juridicus* and *peregrinus* or stranger, law and theatre."[76] For Rancière, politics is the *staging* of the gap between these antithetical figures. It is the interruption of the *histrio*, the player, in the midst of the normal circulation of *personae*. Political subjectivation is the law of theatre disrupting the theatre of law.[77]

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[73] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 36, 38. Translation altered.

[74] Rancière, "The Aesthetic Dimension," 8.

[75] Rancière, "The Aesthetic Dimension", 8.

Thanks to the "play of the third" and the staging of the gap between the ethical and the polemical names of the political subject, the fractured speech situation becomes a common world of argumentation. Admittedly, the 'common' world of argumentation that is staged consists of nothing other than a *clash* of worlds: i.e. a world in which the parties interact *as if* they are equals and another in which they interact *as if* they are not. But it is in such clashes that the disagreement over the meaning of political terms (e.g. becoming-animal) can be dramatized and processed or "litigated" between parties whose very status as speaking beings is in question.

The effect of this litigation is a dismantling of the normal relation of sense and sense, but also a redistribution of its terms. The appearance of the democratic subject *neutralises* assumed divisions, e.g., between those who are supposed to give orders than those who are meant to obey them, and it *redistributes* the terms of division along new lines, e.g., by dramatizing the disagreement between those who insist on enforcing social class distinctions and those who take them to be a matter of indifference. Rancière's political subject, therefore, is not *the beast* that voices its irrational fears and desires; nor is it *the monster* that is outside of every rule. It is *the people* who act in the name of equality and thereby contest the 'reasonable' logic of the ethical consensus, whether it be liberal or fascist. This is why Rancière says that what the people bring to the community, strictly speaking, is *contention*.[78]

VIII. Conclusion

In the final analysis, if there is a disagreement between Esposito and Rancière over the figure of the third person as a philosophical and political category, it is just as much a disagreement over the task of critical theory and the place of the critical theorist. Esposito's philosophy of the impersonal is not a philosophy *of* the third person so much as it is a philosophy *in* the third person. It speaks from the privileged standpoint of the theorist who diagnoses the pathologies of the contemporary political situation and pronounces the truth about the state of affairs in which the oppressed find themselves. By contrast, Rancière resists the temptation to situate his own work above the world of politics in the Nietzschean grand style. He refuses to substitute philosophical thought for politics or collapse the latter into the former. Rather, his writings persistently seek to describe the operation of political speech and action as an irreducible and irreplaceable mode of dissensus. For Rancière, politics is nothing less than a politics *of* the third person: that is, a politics of the part that has no part, a politics of interruption and re-interpretation of the prevailing assumptions of inequality.

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[76] Goodrich, "The Theatre of Emblems," 66.

[77] See Peter Hallward, "Staging Equality: Rancière's Theatrocracy and the Limits of Anarchic Equality," in Rockhill and Watts, *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, 140–57.

[78] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 9.

For this reason, it is not the theorist but the activist who takes centre stage in Rancière's political writings. And those writings never cease to affirm the capacity of the democratic subject—that is, of anyone at all—to speak words out of turn and to appear out of place and thereby to demonstrate ever anew the egalitarian power of political dissent. Admittedly, the account of political subjectivation that he offers remains little more than a sketch, and it would no doubt be possible to demonstrate that it has considerable limitations as a contribution to democratic theory. Nonetheless, its significance lies, above all, in the fact that it brings into view a "third people" whose 'democratic' speech and action contests the authorized 'democratic' forms of dialogue and deliberation.[79]

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[79] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 88.

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