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The Political and/or Politics

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As an opening, a quick overview: if our politics [*la politique*] is no longer simply and strictly that of sovereign states, then it is no longer "politics" as we have known it for a very long time (despite the fact that we can and must analyze sovereignty in other respects). To be treated in terms of politics, the international order would require that we know how to solve the enigma of a non-statist "public right", which would also displace the idea of politics. If, furthermore, we agree on the exigency of indeconstructible justice – as Jacques Derrida bids us, though not him alone: rather justice itself, that which no right can assure – and, as such, on a resistance to all types of restriction related to any form whatsoever of domination, of delimitation, even of determination, then politics is not our terrain, but that politics becomes ethics, or rather, archi-ethics – an ethics that deals henceforth with life [*la vie*] itself or with the survival [*la survie*] (in the ordinary sense and perhaps, beyond that, in the sense of Derrida) of humanity and of the planet (of life itself...). By which that ethics is almost no longer a matter neither of choice nor responsibility, but of a sort of archi-decision, lacking a horizon of reference and a criterion, if not a "wanting-to-live [*vouloir-vivre*]", which must itself be interrogated – and which could come about through a surge (*Drang*) or a drive (*Trieb*) anterior to all willing.

A civilization folds and bends [*plie et ploie*] under itself and not only through the workings of a bad subject of history. A history bends under its own advance and under its own absence of future ("no future"), unless that history is able to deploy itself towards an unknown opening to the "future to come" [*à venir*], which we must learn to understand as "non future".

For all these reasons, "politics" displaces itself, deports itself, deconstructs itself. First of all perhaps by a blurring of the western divide between politics and religion – which immediately brings us back to the Islamic revolution of Iran and its first welcoming by Foucault (i.e. by a thinking that hastened, rightly but no doubt in vain, to regain a "spiritual" or "destining" dimension of politics) – at the same time that this divide refers us, both in our own context and perhaps throughout the world, to a blurring of the very idea of "religion", from the moment at which is dissociates itself from a "politics" that no longer knows where to take its bearings once it has been dissociated.

Is this not what has happened to us? The politics of the sovereign nation state was a resolutely non-religious politics, which, because it was unable to give rise to a civil religion (a Republic), loses itself in the obedience either to economic power or to judicial power, when it is at least able to avoid the fascist temptation (contraction of politics an religion).

Obama happened to us, the intersection of a renewed and so much desired figure of justice and eco-technical and geo-military entanglement, with regards to which a clear-cut choice and a simple disengagement remain problematic. But Obama was and still is an episode [*péripétie*]. The Arab spring happened, but it is still only in suspense.

At the same time, “Europe” no doubt demonstrates well – with or without the financial crisis – that it is too late to found a State of any kind and too early to have an intimation of something else, to draw up another form, but maybe the Empire (which however is neither a State nor a form just a flux) is already completely there.

“Polis” is shaken in its foundations – that which we called “polis”. It is shaken as the “Logos” is shaken and for the same reasons. Likewise, “Left/right” and “liberty/equality” are in a state of semantic and practical suspense, i.e. in deconstruction.

Where then to put “politics” if its place is no longer identifiable? This is one way to put the question that comes to me after [après] and according to [d’après] Derrida. An uncertain and erratic question, because the “where” of that question remains obscure to me: where indeed are the possible “places”? Without a doubt it is necessary to rework the entire topography. But still, it is all the same a question of “place”: we need the right place for politics, a place that is neither “all” nor “nothing”. Almost thirty years ago, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and I, in Paris, thanks to Jacques Derrida, called it “retreat of the political [retrait du politique]”: how to re-trieve the political, draw it out, trace it once again in a different way?

I come now to my paper.

For a conference in Paris where I presented a first version of this text, several years ago, the proposed title was “Political Derrida”. Not then “Derrida’s Politics” – proper to him or titled by him – rather a *zôon politikon* revisited: a different political animal, something new in the same. That *zôon politikon*, he explains in his seminar *The Beast and the Sovereign* (the publication of which was the occasion for that conference), is indeed the proper attribute of the human living thing. Proper, what does that mean?

Derrida never ceased to interrogate the proper, to “exappropriate” it. What he says about the *zoon politikon* is said throughout a text (I am not saying only that of the seminar, but also that of the *Politics of Friendship* and then all of his texts, his text in general) that is concerned with suspending the adherence to “politics”, such as we grasp it, think it, conceptualize it. (He leaves politics precisely in a major indetermination, which opens it to being questioned, being transformed, being surpassed.)

To suspend that adherence or to submit it to a condition of opening on or towards a “beyond”¹.

Beyond [au-delà] ? Which beyond? How could there be a beyond politics?, How could there a beyond in any matter whatsoever? And the step not beyond [le pas au-delà] ? We are quite familiar with these questions. So was he. That beyond, it is necessary to hear it differently – beyond the beyond I could say, to speak in his way.

I am trying to work on a beyond that is not an overstepping, that is not an extravagance, that does not go to extremes. A beyond that in reality would fall on this side: which would exceed politics not towards a super politics but a beyond, which would put politics back in its place, which would restrict its concept.

Hence, detaching itself from politics itself. Or, detaching politics from itself.

There is one instance in the seminar that points in this direction.² The line of thought that I have in mind, comes about in an accidental manner, in a passage that comprises a slight digression, something noted in passing and without stopping, since the text continues with “but the most important thing for us here...”, at which point Derrida returns to the initial subject, which is the Heideggerian interpretation of Sophocles’ *deinotaton*³. In passing, then, Derrida notes that while seeking in Sophocles, “the Greek way of hearing the essence of man,” Heidegger likewise advances a “a return towards what he takes to be a more originary sense of the Greek polis, of

¹ Derrida, *La bête et le souverain*, Vol. 1 (2001-2002), p. 442.

² *ibid.*, p. 355-356.

³ TN : see Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (GA 40, 1935), §52 a, p. 157-162 (Niemeyer version p. 114-117).

which, he says, the translation by city or State does not render the full meaning.” This is noted in a parenthesis, which Derrida follows with a somewhat more extended gloss:

“Before the state then, before what we call the political, the *polis* is the *Da*, the there, in which and by which *Da-sein* is *geschichtlich*, comes about as history, as the historical origin of history. To that historical site belong not merely the sovereigns (*Herrscher*), the men who hold power, the army, the navy, the counsel, the assemblies of the people, but also the gods, the temples, the priests, the poets, the thinkers.”⁴

This gloss, which in fact summarizes a page of Heidegger, underscores the fact that in the *polis* in its “full” sense there is more than the sovereigns, the politicians, that there is something else and other figures. Obviously, that reflection interests Derrida, though he does not add anything to it, since it is not of immediate concern to his topic. That reflection connects directly to what is today my central topic:

“Politics” or the “political” [*la ou le “politique”*] is not the whole of what has just been designated as *polis* in the first sense – i.e. what we could also name “being together” – on the condition that the together of this being-together is not subsumed in advance under a law and a divine authority (totemic, hierarchical in the full sense, sacred, theocratic, etc.).

I will add here a necessary supplement. In a different text (the passage Derrida mentions is in *Einführung in die Metaphysik*), namely the seminar on Parmenides from 1942/43⁵ (hence loaded with fairly clear political intentions) Heidegger says more. He argues that the Greek *Polis* can in no way be understood as the modern State, that “the being of man in his relation to beings as a whole” is gathered by the polis, which as such is not “something” political⁶.

Let us say in the words of Derrida that the *polis* is “beyond” - or “beneath [*en deçà*]” - politics and that the difference, which has gone unnoticed (or the fantasized identity, which amount to the same), between *politeia* and “politics” disturbs our thought of what we name “politics”.

However it stands with Heidegger and Derrida, for the moment let us say that in “politics” there is the problem, the crucial problem, of a word that is itself understood as one of its parts – and which thus still projects both the dream of a politics arriving at its *telos* in a plenitude of signification [*une politique accomplissante, pleinement signifiante*] and the inverse illusion of a renewed denunciation of the “politics of politicians” (very interesting expression if one thinks about it!) and of the politics of interests, cynicism and profits. What we need to understand, to say it in the terms of Heidegger underscored by Derrida (and without even being certain of fully endorsing the ideal of an “original meaning” of *polis*), is that at the outset *polis* subsumed more than politics – even though later politics reclaims as its own, or at least wants to, the totality of the *polis*.

It is a matter then of giving due to that which we can chose to accentuate as a gap [*creuser comme un écart*] between *polis* and politics or as a distinction between the political sphere and other spheres of existing “in common” (which is our whole existence, but not as a whole).

For the reasons laid out by Derrida in the name of the “politics (in the plural, we must not forget) of friendship” or in a completely different way, by a different opening of pluralization, of division, of dehiscence of or within that which we still persist too much in calling “politics” by way of a lack of distinction between state control (and/or the regime itself) and living-together, in one way or another then, the important thing is to figure out not how to detach ourselves from politics in the sense in which one would abandon it (becoming apolitical, disengaged, etc.) but rather how politics detaches itself and through itself opens up onto a dehiscence.

⁴ Derrida, *La bête et le souverain*, Vol. 1 (2001-2002), p. 355f.

⁵ TN : See Heidegger, *Parmenides* (GA 54, winter semester 1942/43).

⁶ TN : *ibid.* p. 142.

I proposed in other places the distinction between two values – not exactly two meanings, but two spans [*portées*], two issues [*enjeux*] – of the word “democracy”. Ultimately, this is also what I was referring to, without my having realized it, in my former work on “community”.

Let me rapidly situate several considerations, which were merely implicit in the text on democracy.⁷

Community exceeds politics in all directions. It is on the order of being-together, which precedes all kind of association or assembly. One associates or assembles individuals. The individual is a product or a secondary, limited, temporary effect, which occurs intermittently amid the discontinuous structure of the “with”. That structure is nothing other than the structure of being.

Being is the with: the commonality of beings, i.e. the fact that “they are.” From a formal point of view being is a common property, but yet, not a real property. (This is what we learn from Kant, but perhaps ultimately from all philosophy.) Being is not separable from beings – and it follows that being is only as the being of beings, of such and such a being, and being is not in itself.

Common is the “to-exist” of each existent. Its pure, brute fact, with no preexisting right. That fact is without substance, without subject, without supposition. As such, that fact is the nihilating nothing [*né-ant*]: the non-being of being-in-the-world as such.

It is thus common according to that nihilating nothingness [*né-antité*]. Our common is a nihilating nothing, absence of property: not pure impropriety (which would be a negative form of propriety, an essential privation) but, on the contrary, excess of possible appropriations and infinite excess. The *raison d'être* or the sense of being (in the most classical form: why we are here, we, “the world”) is very rationally and very reasonably (we can “give an account” of it) infinite. In other words, both infinitely interminable and in each finitization (individual, work) equal to an infinite in actuality (that which strips a finite of its finitude: such that eternity ultimately alters a finite in itself).

The with is the condition of the proximity of beings. Proximity forbids the fusion (confusion or infusion). On the contrary, it opens the relation: in other words, both infinities in actuality and the infinitization of their *partage* (in both senses of the word: division and exchange).

These two mutually re-enforcing conditions – ordinarily referred to as “sense”, so long as we do not close that sense off in “signification” – are put into play in multiple ways. The multiplicity is essential to that which has no being in itself or no property other than to exist. The multiplicity in question is not that of individuals; rather it is that of the modalities by which sense puts itself into play. For instance: love, desire, art, thought, knowledge [*savoir*], power (each of these regimes only give a class or a type, which radiates according to modes, which are in turn multiple).

These modalities exceed politics, which mobilizes parts or aspects of several, or indeed of all (and no doubt politics, a political justice and a political talent are also judged according to these mobilizations, their ways [*allures*], their formulas), but politics does not wish itself to be a common place, neither synthesis nor assumption. Unless it takes on the configuration of a civil religion – of which one extreme is the lost or dreamed of Athens and the other is fascisms -, politics orders the conditions of multiple access to sense (to senses); it makes possible and it must make impossible the denial of that access (misery, abjection, subjection: in sum, all that closes, fills, unifies, crushes the with in the play of its intervals, scansions, alterations).

Yet making possible, or rather not making impossible, the access to sense, is not properly speaking granting access to it. Furthermore, it is a matter of an access that mixes the two values of the word: the arrival and the occurrence [*l'entrée et la survenue*], the legitimate penetration and the violent take over [*saisissement*]. This is essentially what sense is: we enter into it and it surges up within us. What we imprecisely call art, love, or thought does not separate *ethos* and *pathos*. This is not what politics is concerned with; politics wants nothing to do

⁷ TN : Jean-Luc Nancy, *Vérité de la démocratie*, Paris, Galilée, 2008.

with receiving by penetrating. Politics must order [*ordonner*] – in all senses of the word – in such a way that the passage towards the beyond of its order remains free of obstacles.

What we ask of politics is that it gives form and visibility to the possibility of living together (recognizing that living together is not one particular determination of living but the constitutive determination for human life, just as much as it is for the life of bees or the life of flowers, though according to a different modality of “together”).

We have to stress: that demand by itself does not imply the demand to put into effect, to accomplish the living-together or to embody it, to give it a sense or a truth (as one wants to say). This latter demand is different. Perhaps it is not even a “demand” but rather that which I would prefer to name “desire”, understanding by that, an expectation or tension turned towards its own intensity and not towards an object of satisfaction. It is this distinction that I wish to insist on in what follows.

For the moment, let us say that the demand we make on politics – or the demand by which politics is brought about – is very much a demand that calls for a response, a legitimate expectation of response and satisfaction. No matter what complexity and difficulty may inhere in the conception of what I named the “form and visibility of the possibility of living together,” the fact remains that politics must present that possibility, design its contours and give it structure. Politics must signify “therefore, under these conditions, according to this constitution – I am taking the word *lato sensu* – you can live together, your coexistence is guaranteed.” After all, this is how politics is born: there where one day there was no longer a being-together given according to one form or another (clan, tribe, lineage, territory, totem myth, divine rules and authorities in general). By that, it must be understood that the “divine” represented nothing other than the given character of living-together. Politics is born in the withdraw of the divine, i.e. in the givenness of our being-with, by which I mean, not only the-one-with-the-other [*avec-les-uns-les-autres*] but just as much with-the rest-of-the-world or the rest-of-beings.

In the terms I have used, demand and desire are not distinguished from each other, so long as the “together” is given. Politics – the artistry of the *polis*, the technique, the know-how, the sleight of hand – comes about when the “together” – *our* together and, more precisely, *we* ourselves, must be made possible from the outset. Politics is the possibilizing of a *we*, a *we* that could then not be possible, that itself lacks evidence and givenness.

Yet the “we”, which has been made possible, is nevertheless not a completed “we”: on the contrary, the “we” opens up onto its own “impossibility”, i.e. onto an infinite reality of right – love, art, justice, thinking...

One could say that the birth of politics brings with it (or is brought about by...) a disruption [*dénivellation*] or a dehiscence between what we could for convenience distinguish as “living together” (cohesion, consistency, regulation of a quasi-organism, of an organization) and “being-together” (dividing up [*partage*] of sense or truth, ontological, existential and not categorical “with”).

With the *polis*, the possibility arises that being-together does not allow itself to be understood in the form, the matrix, the mold or the enclosure of what makes up a “city” – of what makes up a village, group, tribe, people. It is possible that the being-together of the *polis* is not fully understood in these forms. It is possible that the “common” is not entirely determined by – let us say, the commune. It is possible that what reveals itself to be possible, to be desirable, is a “community of social de-liaison”⁸.

Because one cannot have a liaison with the incommensurable (with the absolute, with the infinite): it is through the de-liaison (which is in no way de-liaison between individuals, but rather the de-liaison of sense) opened and propagated by the incommensurable itself that one is related to the incommensurable. The Greek *polis* no doubt contained a dispersion [*fuite*] of (divine) sense: essentially, tragedy contained this dispersion in two senses of containing (it inscribed the dispersion in the polis, it circumscribed that dispersion). Our politics, on the contrary, must delimit and keep open the access to what it does not *contain*: the essential infinite flight of sense.

⁸ Derrida, *Politiques de l'amitié*, p. 47.

Le zoon politikon is *politikon* because he or she can speak, which is to say, think – good and evil, just and unjust, etc., as Aristotle says. This dividing up of speech is not in principle exposed to a dispersion of sense. There is nevertheless in the philosophy of Aristotle himself – with the final exaltation of the contemplative life – something that exceeds the mutual envelopment of *logos* and *polis* and consequently the nature of *philia*, which is the medium of that mutual envelopment – to which, no doubt, Derrida was trying to respond.

In one way or another, we must inevitably encounter a dissociation of power and sense. Power contains, retains the infinite de-liaison that sense opens – and which is also a threat: the threat is not only that of the *bellum omnium contra omnes*, it is also that of de-liaison and let us say of the delirium that inhabits the heart and the binding core itself of the attachment that we call sense. This second threat is no doubt the motor of the first.

For this then, power – sovereign power – can only retain for itself the secret of that threat, which it wards off [*prévient*]– and at the same time it lets go of [*lâche*] this secret, which is not for power itself, which is not for politics to enter into. Politics lets the secret slip, revealing it and letting it drop, unveiling it as something that escapes politics.

Derrida writes: “Sovereignty is absolute when it absolves itself of all relation and holds itself in the night of the secret.”⁹ This text is old by comparison to the “political” texts: yet it expresses well the intimate contradiction that sovereignty is exposed to – at least when it is not separated from power (contrary to what Bataille was convinced of).

A dissociation that we can, as we did above, date back to the birth of the West, but which we should not understand as being latent in all forms of society: everywhere, there is a dehiscence between power and sense (this is perhaps what Deleuze means by saying that “everywhere there is the State”). Power – and submission – respond to the exterior of sense. This is why power is at once the place of control, of mastery, of the baring of the secret, and a place without a beyond, i.e. without access to sense (because sense is beyond - as I said, sense exists in its de-liaison itself). In that way, politics leads to nothing. It can “satisfy” – sufficient structure, sufficient standards - but it cannot bring us to a climax of joy [*faire jouir*], except for the joy of power (which is the one and true mode of the beyond for politics). No giving of joy. No political joy, nothing but the success, happiness, and gratification of power.

A paradox: the spheres of the secret (of sense), which is not only kept secret but is also unrevealable – because, a secret entirely disclosed as a secret, i.e. definitively concealed and sealed off, foreclosed, set apart [*placé dehors*] – the spheres of that secret are the spheres where there is at once access and coming to completion – the work, the *oeuvre* – like art, love, thinking, knowledge, gesture, etc. – and where there is never *satis-faction*. Rather, there is joy beyond satisfaction, beyond and beneath. To take pleasure in difference. Joy is its own difference: that is its secret, absolutely hidden and absolutely exposed, but exposed elsewhere than in the public space of politics. In other spaces, less public than common: common and singular. Singularly common.

In an interview published in French under the title “Politics and Friendship”, Derrida says: “The political [*Le politique*]’ is ultimately a very obscure notion [*philosophème*].”¹⁰ I would say that that obscurity is not easily dissipated and perhaps not at all, because it is the synthesis of three formidable obscurities: the “common”, “power”, and “sense”. Yet we can at least introduce a distinction between politics understood as taking over [*comme assumption de*] the “being of man in his relation to beings” and politics understood as the particular sphere designated to hold open the access to such a relation.

That makes a very big difference and yet we employ the word with the two values alternating or even confused. If a difference comes to light it is only between a restricted “politics”, which is that of the government and of politicians, and the great “Politics”. That difference arises with democracy and one could give a large number of examples from the 19th century. The following is from Hugo:

⁹ Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence*, p. 391.

¹⁰ Derrida, *Politique et amitié : Entretien avec Michael Sprinker autour de Marx et d'Althusser*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 2011, p. 80.

“For a long time I believed that the Republic was only a political form. The Republic is an idea; the Republic is a principle, the Republic is a right. The Republic is the very incarnation of progress (*Things seen [Choses vues]*, July 1851).”

We are not done with the double value of “politics” or of “the political” [*de la ou du “politique”*]. I will give two very characteristic examples.

The first is taken from Bataille. In 1958, Dionys Mascolo asks him to join in an act of political contestation. Bataille refuses in the following terms: “For me it is a matter of the impossibility of being in agreement with the principle on which real action in an organized society rests. {...} The political domain that remains for us is the domain of the possible. That domain inspires in me very little interest. {...} Unconditional refusal is the affirmation of my sovereignty. I do not want such a violent affirmation to be muddled up with compromise.”

We see here that the word “sovereignty”, which was of capital importance for modern political theory from Bodin to Rousseau, slides toward a usage in which sovereignty is withdrawn from the political arena, so that it may be more fully affirmed.

The second example is taken from Granel, in 1980. He asks that we aspire “both to renounce modern political discourse {and}, simultaneously and in opposition to it, to conceive as “politics” the decision to discover, to uncover, to formulate and to carry out the possibilities of being of singular-plural *Dasein*.”¹¹

One sees here that that excellent reader of Heidegger returns, without knowing it, towards what Heidegger reserved for the *politeia* and what he thought was foreign to modern politics. I would be tempted to say: it is understood; we are all ready to understand it – and yet it is exactly that return that we must forbid ourselves to dream of, if we want to think through the exigency of today.

That exigency is to discern the henceforth irreversible gap between all the various “possibilities of being” and the political sphere proper, which must arrange the access. If, today the economic, judicial, religious and cultural spheres – and with these spheres the semantics of their names –, all together or each in its turn, are racing out of control in a way that is inflationary and even exorbitant and ruinous, it is because “politics” or “the political” harbors a discrepancy or an internal distortion between two values which are henceforth foreign to each other – let us say, an existential value and a social value or, in other terms, a value in accordance with the community and another in accordance with collectivity. To be clear, the two values are related and interdependent. Yet that difference of the values of the same *co-* - of that same “with”, which is the with *of* being, even more than a “being-with” – and thus that self-differentiation of the *co-* is precisely that which prevents it from coagulating into a mass and a destiny.

-Translated by Christopher Sauder

¹¹ Gérard Granel, *De l'Université*, Paris, TER, 1980, p. 93.