**1
eng**

The Death of the Political Luc Nancy

Janar Mihkelsaar

*PhD Candidate,
Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy,
The Unit of Political Science
University of Jyväskylä,
Opinkivi, Keskussairaalantie 2, PO Box 35, Finland
E-mail: janar.mihkelsaar@gmail.com*

Thinking the Political with Jean-Luc Nancy¹

Abstract:

In this article, I argue that at the center of Jean-Luc Nancy's approach to the political lies the thinking of subject as that of relation. Throughout the historical actualizations of, for example, the individual, the state, or the people as a subject, the problematic of relation is one that has retreated and now demands to be subjected to a retreatment. When the arche-teleological presuppositions that constitute subject as that which is given enter the phase of deconstruction, subject comes to present itself as nothing but the activity of relating itself to itself. I respond to Nancy's call to invent "an affirmation of relation" by way of rethinking the logics of sovereignty and democracy. While sovereignty unites, posits, finitizes, and finishes the self of the people, a post-68 democracy pluralizes, infinitizes, and

---

disfigures the identity of the people. Between sovereignty and democracy, notwithstanding their conflicting tenets, the relation is not that of reciprocal exclusion. One is rather the correlative of the other. Without the one, the other would not make any sense. Through this Janus-faced economy of the political, the people can experience its own "reality" — to experience relation itself. The affirmation of relation is what gives and keeps free the voided site of the political for the infinite self-institution of the people, and for that reason is political par excellence.

Keywords:
Democracy, Nancy, relation, sovereignty, subject, the people, the political

In 1980, with Jacques Derrida's encouragement and support, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe founded the Center for the Philosophical Research of the Political at the *École Normale Supérieure*. Over the next few years, the center provided an avenue for philosophico-political discussions on the subject of what was called the *retrait du politique*, the retreat *of/from* the political (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1997).[2] Considered in conjunction with the retreat, "the political" (*das Politische, le politique*) has the shape of what has lost its philosophical founding, its specificity and retreated into the domination of, for example, the technical, the social; and also of what is to be subjected to a retreatment by way of retracing it back from its oblivion and its obfuscations. What has specifically retreated, and what needs a retreatment, is the politico-philosophical realization of the political in accordance with the schema of a subject.

In one of his addresses in the center, published as "The Jurisdiction of the Hegelian Monarch," Nancy tentatively summarizes what he understands as the political: "[T]he concept of the political is just that of the actualization," meaning, the actualization of philosophemes such as good or, what concerns us here, the actualization of a class, a citizen, an individual, a state, or a people as a subject (Nancy 1993: 117; 1997: 106). No matter what form this actualization takes, a subject is that which is always already pre- or post-supposed, meaning it is constituted as an arche-teleological unity. When this presupposition that constitutes the subject is pushed to its extreme conclusions (e.g., racism) and starts to crumble, we may catch a glimpse of what is buried under a subject's hypostases: that is,

---

[2] See also: Fraser (1984); James (2006); Dejanovic (2015).

into *the question of relation*. Whenever the problem of relation pops up in the Occidental tradition, as is written in one of the addresses in *Retreating the Political*, "the political becomes an enigma, lacuna or limit" (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1997: 118–19). Today, this question of relation is at the center of ongoing debates on issues such as populism (e.g., Laclau), ontico-ontological difference (e.g., Heidegger), psychoanalysis (e.g., Lacan), speculative realism (e.g., Harman), and sovereignty (e.g., Agamben). By tying the question of relation with the fate of the subject, this study contributes to recent research by offering a novel conceptualization of the people, democracy, and sovereignty.

Even though the relationality of the political in Nancy is closely associated with the much-discussed theme of community, I propose to examine the issue of relation with a view to confronting the two extreme configurations of the political. One extreme concerns a subject's *sovereign* auto-position, insofar as it is in danger of turning out to be totalitarian and suicidal (e.g., Nazi racism); and the second concerns the *democratic* de-substantialization, or "spacing" of a subject, insofar as it is in danger of turning out to be without any collective identification, "without any *demos* or *kratein* of its own" (Nancy 1997: 108–10). In view of such dangers, any attempt to absolutize the schema of sovereignty at the expense of democracy (or vice versa) threatens to end with a deadlock. In contrast to those well-versed studies that tend to highlight Nancy's conceptions of democracy (e.g., Prozorov 2018), sovereignty (e.g., Eaghll 2014), and their abstract identity (e.g., Raffoul 2015), I argue for a thesis that suggests *Nancy's retreatment of the political must involve the articulation of sovereignty with democracy*.

To make the case in point, I read Nancy's "The Jurisdiction of the Hegelian Monarch" (1993), which sets out to retrieve the problematic of relation from Hegel's dialectical actualization of the state (or the people) as the monarch, that is, from the "closure" of the political as an absolute subject.[5] Having reactivated the problematic of relation concealed under the hypostases of the monarch, Nancy ends his article with a call to invent "an affirmation of relation" (1993: 142). Responding to this call, I put forward a thesis that this affirmation involves two distinctive moments: "the establishment of a relation," and the retracement of separation (Ibid.). By the for-

---

[5] This reading is an interpretative study influenced especially by the Hegelian and Heideggerian themes. I do not aim to present the intellectual evolution of Nancy's thinking over the course of years, but rather to substantiate the main thesis of the article. The problem of relation needs to be discussed in a wider context that takes into account Nancy's references to, e.g., Lacan and Spinoza.

mer, I argue in the second section, Nancy understands sovereignty as that which is initially devised to solve the modern problem of institution, more precisely, the *self*-institution of the people. By the latter, I argue in the third section, Nancy understands democracy as that which in the spirit of '68 reveals the incommensurability of the people. At first, it looks as though the logic of sovereignty is diametrically opposed to that of democracy: the first establishes the identity of the people, whereas the second annuls or disfigures it; the first points to "the precipitation of the infinite in finitude," whereas the second insists on the openness of a finite self to infinity (Nancy 2010b).

However, between the two heterogeneous logics of the political, the relation is not that of reciprocal exclusion, because the political is that site where people open up to themselves as a people and, at the same time, exhibit themselves through being separated from itself. Sovereignty and democracy, as I argue in the fourth section, are the two heterogeneous — and yet inseparable — faces of what constitutes the nonsubstantial self of the people. In the fifth section, I defend a claim that the double movement of the political enables the people to get a glimpse of its own "reality" as a *non-given relation* that needs yet to be tied. Last, but not least, I argue that the affirmation of relation is political par excellence, insofar as it gives and keeps free the place for the infinite inscription of the people.

1. The Political as the Question of Relation

Historically, and somewhat arbitrarily, one may date the retreat of the theologico-political presupposition of a "politico-philosophical order" back to the first wave of democratic revolutions in the period between 1760 and 1800. The decapitation of King Louis XVI especially severed the link between the religious and the profane (Nancy 1997: 91, 105; cf. Lefort 1988). When monarchic sovereignty transformed into popular sovereignty, modern society lost its grounding and legitimization in the divine transcendence of God. But as the history that followed proved, the birth and diffusion of democratic ideas did not lead directly to an abrupt cancellation of political theology. Quite the contrary: the old, sacred theology was replaced with "a laicized theology, or if one prefers a romanticized theology, of the 'people,' 'history,' and 'humanity'" (Nancy 1997: 105). The inauguration of modern democracy reshaped and re-inscribed the theologico-political paradigm in accordance with the schema of the subject.

Modern politics strives toward the realization of subject, whether it be the form of an individual, a community, or a state. Departing from Descartes, the subject is envisaged as "a subjectivity present to itself, as the support, the source, and the finality of representation, certitude, and will," as a kind of a substantive being, which — like a god — founds the totality of all beings in their own being-ness (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1990: 294). In the philosophico-political tradition, Nancy maintains, subject is considered to be something that is already out there (e.g., identity, God); or, alternatively, it is conceived as an imperative, a historico-political task to be taken up and accomplished. Whether it is primordially established or will be given in the future, the subject is always already *pre- or post-supposed* (Nancy 1997: 106). The *arche*-teleological structure of this presupposition is crystalized in the hypostases of an "individual," a "party," a "race," a "nation," a "state," and a "people." In that regard, "the myth of the Arian race" in Nazism and the revolutionary proletariat class in the Soviet Union illustrate that the postulation of the subject tends to end with the production of death. That is why it is urgent to pose anew the question: What is the "essence" of the political?

To show how Nancy responds to this problem, in this section I summarize the idea of his "The Jurisdiction of the Hegelian Monarch." My goal is to show two things: first, that Hegel's actualization of the state as the monarch opens and, simultaneously, forecloses the question of the political; and, second, that the irreducibility of relation deconstructs from within the dialectical idea of the monarch.

In his *Philosophy of Right,* Hegel (1996) depicts the dialectical unfolding of the "objective spirit," which culminates with the idea of the state. The end of the state is not simply to protect private property, administer social relations, and arbitrate civil conflicts, but to realize the ethical totality of individuals, the ethical *co-belonging* of people (Ibid.: 112). Put tautologically, the true end — or truth — of the state (or social union) is the actualization of "union as such" (*die Vereinigung als solche*) (Ibid.: 240). With saying that, Hegel distinguishes the domain of the state from the private realm of family and, more importantly, from the sphere of civil society where particular, individual interests and needs reign and are in conflict with one another. The spirit of the state, insofar as it realizes "the relation between individualities to Spirit and relation of Spirit to the self" (Nancy 1993: 112), is qualitatively different from the particularistic dispersion of civic life. As Hegel thinks about the state as *transcending* civil society, he opens an inquiry into the specificity of the political.

But according to Nancy, the moment of this very opening yields simultaneously to that of the closure. To understand this claim, we need to discern how the actualization of the state takes place. As for Hegel, the non-actual idea of the state would be a mere conception without any hold in actuality, that is, a "bad" idea. The true idea of the state comes to "exist in its truth only as a subject" — as a monarch (Hegel 1996: 286). But this monarch is not a mere individuality, an idiosyncratic particularity (i.e., a despot), a superior individual, a mere symbol (e.g., a flag), or a representative (e.g., parliament). The monarch's truth converts the subjectivist idea of the state "into the unity of a real person," the essence of an "ethical life" (*Sittlichkeit*) into the will and voice of this existence, the concrete living willing of free social union (Nancy 1993: 117). The personal unity of the monarch neither *re*-presents nor symbolizes, but rather *presents* the organic unity of civil society, government, courts, military, and *people*. The monarch personifies the existence of the people, "the *Da-sein* of the political existing, of the essence of the political *existing* in and as this *zoon*" (Ibid.: 115). The unity of the monarch, insofar as it actualizes the relation of people to one another as a spiritual whole, incarnates the subjectivist idea of the state as *this* subject. The monarch is thus nothing but the state itself as this person.

The concrete living person of the monarch has to be erected to actualize the spiritual fulfillment of relation to itself of a social union, but this kind of actualization substantivizes the "as such" of social union, with the result of closing back again the question of the political.

But in the manner that Hegel conceives the actualization of a social union, the question of relation remains visible everywhere, even though it is not addressed as such. Nancy is convinced that "the determination of the monarch is precisely what makes this presupposition come forth and renders it problematic" (Ibid.: 121). For, between the ontological necessity of a dialectical deduction and the sensible certainty of the "this," the true subjectivity of the state and the individuality of the monarch, there is not only a dialectical link but also an unbridgeable gap. What becomes apparent when this gap is opened is that the monarch "actualizes union by not completing relation, by inscribing it in *the space of separation*" (Ibid.: 140; emphasis added). This non-completion, inscribed in the actualization of a social union, is legible upon the monarch's body as a distance between the dialectical concept of the monarch and the sensible contingency of individuality, an institution's jurisdiction, and the monarch's naturally aging body, the monarch as "the

subject of enunciation" and what it enunciates (e.g., the state / the people) (Ibid.: 132, 138–41).

This point transpires in Hegel's depiction of the monarch as "the summit," but s/he is the summit not in the sense of an end point or a top; rather, it is "the perfection of the edifice realized for itself": the height or altitude in and for itself (Ibid.: 116). This supreme height is detached from the bottom, which means s/he is separated from conditions, foundations, hierarchical gradations. When we contemplate the monarch's singularity in the space of separation, we contemplate a gap between social union and itself, this subject and a subjectivity. That is why the monarch not only actualizes but also deconstructs social union.

How the idea of the monarch deconstructs itself sheds light on modernity's entire strategy to embody the indivisibility, unicity, and identity of the state / the people in a subject's hypostasis, and, by doing so, to tame and appropriate a socio-juridico-political union's transcendence. When such figurations enter from within into the phase of deconstruction, the question is neither that of mourning the moment of fulfillment, nor that of celebrating a substantiated transcendence being nullified, nor that of seeking to fill in the empty place of the monarch with epigonal substitutes. Instead, the task is to glimpse how non-completion discloses the limits *internal* to what goes under the name of "actualization." At the limits of actualization we undergo an excess of a social union over any ordering, representation, or management of sociopolitical affairs. The experience of this excess is what the theologico-political transcriptions of the subject seek to obliterate and repress.

This excess brings back the question of relation before relation is fulfilled in the hypostasis of subject, and so it discloses the impossibility of relation closing in on itself as an enclosed circle and forming a self-identical subject. That is why, Nancy maintains, "[t]he Being–or modality–of the relation as such should be questionable *before* its absorption, its reabsorption, its solution, or its relief in the monarch's subjectivity" (Ibid.: 121). To pass into the position of a subject, it is first necessary to pass "through the presentation of a self to a self–through *relation as such*" (Ibid.: 120; emphasis added). Considered like that, the subject is a *self* that consists in the activity of relating itself to itself. The subject springs forth from the activity of "relating-to-oneself." The activity of "relating-to-oneself," which precedes and exceeds every fulfillment and (re-)presentation of a subject, is generative.

That a subject arises from the movement of relation that cannot be completely extinguished means that a subject is not that which

can be pre- or post-supposed but is that which shows itself now as a *political* issue. Having retrieved the question of relation, we more clearly glimpse the political. By the political, Nancy does not circumscribe one sphere — particularly a political system — of society, but "a 'place' of the 'symbolization' of relation itself" (Ibid.: 142). Expanding on this concise formulation, in what follows I argue that the "symbolization," or actualization of relation as such, consists in affirming the two heterogeneous but intertwined moments of the political: "the establishment of relation" and the retracement of separation.

2. Sovereignty, or, the Establishment of Relation

If we follow Nancy's path of reactivating the question of relation that is buried underneath the closure of the subject, we are congruently contesting the theologico-political features — such as unicity, indivisibility, identity — of sovereignty. If so, it is not so clear in what sense (if any) the affirmation of relation must involve the establishment of relation as one of its constitutive moments. Beginning with examining the retreat and distorted persistence of sovereignty, this section shows how Nancy thinks about the concept of sovereignty.

Quite often Nancy alludes to Georges Bataille's phrase: "Sovereignty is NOTHING." If anything is certain, it is that Bataille's sentence "most certainly does not mean that sovereignty is death," but rather perhaps that sovereignty is dead, or, as shown further on, it likes to present itself as the thing of the past (Nancy 2000: 139). Thus, for a start, this loaded and provocative sentence may be interpreted to mean: the place of sovereignty is *empty*, which means there is the absence of supreme ends, the absence of good, the absence of essence, the absence of foundation, or the absence of finality (Ibid.: 137). The upshots of this assertion are in accord with the spirit of a time: when "no one can believe that economics has its own, universally legitimated finality anymore" (Ibid.: 110); no one can claim to grasp the *telos* of science and technological advancement; no one can be absolutely certain of having grasped the ultimate meaning of social totality. Therewith, it looks as if our juridico-economico-techological or, put simply, disenchanted world, the world without finality opens a *straight* way out of what has been called sovereignty.

In his article "War, Right, Sovereignty — *Techne,*" Nancy argues, things are not that simple.

For whenever it seems as though the era of sovereignty has come to an end and has been replaced with the (cost-)effective manage-

ment and administration of social relations, economic affairs, and state apparatus, there comes a point when sovereignty makes an uncanny return from death in the form of "an exasperated desire for legitimation and/or finality" (Ibid.). Such desire, which is prone to capture the public after the downfall of supreme ends and values, "proposes the thoroughgoing execution of sovereignty," which means: putting to work the right of the sovereign to declare enemy and to wage war (Ibid.: 138). But recent wars such as the Gulf War are not even considered as "real" wars, but as "humanitarian interventions" or "police actions." What is new in such wars, according to Nancy, is not so much the employment of advanced technology, the scope of operations, as the loss of a sovereign "brilliance" (*éclat*) in the figure of glorious finish. Thus, we are barred to "go any further than the brilliance of death and destruction" (Ibid.: 138). Our condition is for that reason ambivalent: even though, having lost "natural" meaning, the schema of sovereignty shows itself as something that is *inevitable*, and thus it cannot be so simply disposed of.

Then, quite contrary to a naïve belief, there is no direct way out from the world and the much-touted ills of sovereignty. Furthermore, at a time when economic calculations, humanist moralism, and technological advance capture our imagination and determine what we think is possible, it appears, on closer inspection, that sovereignty has been put in service of the juridico-economico-technological world to secure, expand and conceal its *domination* (Ibid.: 111). This domination turns on its head the modern idea of sovereignty, which gained ground as feudal societies dissolved and political power lost grounding in a divine authority. Whereas the medieval exercise of power was embedded in ancestral linage and costumes that secured the relationships of domination (e.g., between the vassal and the suzerain), the modern concept of sovereignty cuts into Nancy's view through traditional loyalties, hierarchical gradations, and "natural law": it does not let itself be limited, it is simply supreme (Nancy 2007: 98). The supremacy of sovereign power, which is associated with the autonomy of self-determination, goes against any kind of domination.

Living in an age when theologico-political figures are retreating, the idea of sovereignty is hollowed of substance, exhausted and turned on its head, but in spite of this its schema still persists and continues to assert itself, and often with even greater force and nefarious violence. Against this backdrop, Nancy argues for the challenge of reconsidering the contours of sovereignty.

Perhaps the most important way of seeing sovereignty, Nancy (2010b) reminds us, is to interpret it as a solution to the problem

of institution that arises from political power's fall from divine legitimacy. Since Machiavelli's teachings of the prince, the question of sovereignty is that of a self-institution or *auto-position* of the people. But the things we have seen are not as simple as that, while social imagination, despite its transformation, is trapped in the undercurrents of laicized theology. For it is assumed that for the people to institute itself means to *make itself into a subject*. Following this theologico-political predicament, the people is envisaged as the sovereign only on the condition that they are capable of mastering their internal divisions and social heterogeneity, give themselves an intimate and immediate interiority, digest a "foreign" exteriority, demarcate a territory and represent a common essence (Nancy 1998: 105–07). What drives such self-institution is a desire to appropriate and master themselves as a subject.

When, however, people are actual only in declaring themselves publicly through the mouth of a leader, for example, the "French people," the question of self-institution is radicalized (Nancy 2010b). That "who (or what) is the people?" cannot be univocally resolved with reference to something that is already given, like "nature," a "god," or a "country." The *arche*-theological unity of a subject is no longer anterior to the process of a self-institution. Nothing governs and directs the sovereign acts of auto-position. What becomes visible in the retreat of substantivized figures is *the very passage to* a subject.

More clearly than before, Nancy thinks, subject shows itself as having the shape of self; and self is the self in the movement of "turning back on itself" or "coming back to itself." Self is what comes to the self, which means it is the kind of relation that is in relation with itself. The self's relation to itself founds the circular structure of subject. As long as the reality of self is not derived somewhere else like nature or God, or as long as the reality of self is not instituted by someone else like Machiavelli's prince, the people's relation to self is the sovereign relation; meaning, the self-institution of a people is the autonomous constitution of self by way of establishing relation to self. But, and this is important, self's auto-position has to be *infinite*, because no self is given before the constitutive act of establishing relation.

For an abstract sovereignty to attain an actual substance and presence, it is necessary to come somehow from an abstract *infinity* to *finitude*. Meaning: it is necessary to put the endless process of coming to itself to a halt, which is to say, to inscribe and (re)present the infinite idea of self. To designate this moment of a delimitation, Nancy uses the French word "*finition,*" finish, which is "used in the

context of the finish of a garment as well as the final finish of a building i.e. the very end" (Ibid.). The point of finish posits the self of the people out there as a reality to be reckoned with; it comes into presence under the articulation of a name, for example, the "French people." The self of the people emerges as "something" at a point when the infinite relation to self is precipitated in the finite, that is to say, in some "thing" (e.g., a figurehead) or some "subject" (e.g., a "leader"). By way of establishing relation to self, people come to recognize themselves in a finite figure and so become the people. The figure of a finish produces the *finite* inscription of the infinite.

But if the people is "unable to make an end to its own process of self-constitution," then "the figure of any kind of making-an-end"—even the most extreme figures of the finish" like Hitler in Germany and Mussolini in Italy—may appear as a solution (Ibid.). The crisis of parliamentary democracy in the interwar period perhaps illustrates that the most extreme solution may be perceived as being better than no solution at all. To acknowledge the need to finish does not mean to conclude automatically that "Nazi logic is the cool logic of sovereignty" (Ibid.), but to admit that the point of finish is not evil in itself but is an *essential* part of any identity-building process: "Figuration itself cannot simply be condemned. It too is part of the structure" (Nancy 1992: 393).

But if the figure of finish is constitutively unavoidable, the crucial question is of how to *escape* the rigid fixation and substantiation of identity, the effacement and oblivion of "act-of-relating-to oneself." This is the question of whether the point of a finish, produced by way of establishing relation to self, is a final one.

3. Post-68 Democracy, or, Retracing Separation

Historically, Nancy sees the May '68 events in France as a turning point—as "the first announcement, still opaque to itself, of another approach to the political" (Nancy 1997: 116). This event's significance does not lie in the announcement of a new vision, a new idea, or a new political agency, but rather in that it opened the question of relation by deconstructing the substantionalist and foundationalist preconceptions of the political as the subject. The May '68 uprising in France offers insights into what a democracy worthy of the name is about: into the incommensurability of the people. Taking its cue from Nancy's *The Truth of Democracy* (2010a), this section elaborates on the philosophico-political upshots of this event.

While the first wave of democratic revolutions (1760–1800) did not so much efface as reinscribe the ideas of political theology in

accordance with the schema of a subject, the significance of May '68 in Nancy's eyes lies in that it ventured to question "the truth of democracy" (Ibid.: 1). This venture inaugurated another approach to what democracy is — and should be — all about. As with other related currents of thought that stem from '68, Nancy's works have sought to elucidate and elaborate the lasting impact of this groundbreaking endeavor. Compared with other revolutionary events in history such as '89, '48 or '17, this event refrained from presenting a new vision, a new project, or a new idea or a prognosis, on the basis of which to render intelligible the totality of history or society. Instead, Nancy says, "preference was given to greeting the present of an irruption or disruption that introduced no new figure, agency, or authority" (Ibid.: 14). The romantic reconfiguration of political theology was broken by '68, by virtue of subjecting to scrutiny the "sedimentations" of givens, including the positivity of institutions, ideas, norms, laws. From then on, democracy — prior to being a form of government and even a constitution — becomes a form of "spirit" (Ibid.: 32).

No constative description or normative prescription can exhaust this spirit of post-68 democracy, "insofar as it engages an infinity in actuality" (Ibid.: 11). This judgment sounds like a variation on Rousseauism. If democracy for Jean-Jacques Rousseau is suitable only for "a people of gods," "it is because of his invincible conviction that the people should be divine, that man should be divine, in other words, that the infinite should be given" (Ibid.: 19). Such an infinite, even though it is given in the form of "ought," annuls infinity. Infinity at stake is not an ideal possible, which inaugurates "the indefinite pursuit of an end that is perpetually receding" (Ibid.). Unlike the order of a virtual possible, Nancy is interested in an *effective* infinite, which finds one of its expressions in Pascal's formula "Man infinitely transcends man." Transcendence like this does not simply go beyond the earthly world: it is not the one that passes from the human to the divine, the temporal to the supratemporal, the corporal into the incorporeal. "Infinitely transcending" rather means here that the humanity of human being slips through the nets of (re-)presentations, definitions, concepts, and models.

This view on infinity calls into question a disposition that lays claim to share out the incalculable in figures such as "the destiny of a nation or a republic, the destiny of humanity, the truth of relation, the identity of the common" (Ibid.: 17). These figures tend toward the prescription of a "good life," which shapes multiple life-forms into one substantial all-encompassing unity. Sixty-eight, however, mutates "humanity's relation to its own end" (Nancy 2011: 74).

Because from then on there are numerous ends that go under names like love, thought, art, ad infinitum. On the condition that there is no absolute criterion to judge which form of life is the best, none of the infinite relations to a "good life" fares any better than the other. This kind of infinitization does not explode all distinctions, however. For Nancy, democratic politics especially configure a place that makes it possible to pursue multiple ends, to have infinite rapport with the infinite. While the diverse regimes of sense are "entitled every time, at every occurrence, so to speak, to proclaim themselves accomplished," politics supports the invention, circulation, and free interplay of ends without realizing the substantive communion of multiple forms (Ibid.).

That is why Nancy claims it is above all else necessary to maintain the distinction of politics. The place of the political must be separated — but "not separated by a suspicion that keeps all 'politicians' at arm's length, but separated in accordance with the essence of being in common" (Nancy 2010a: 21). This "being-in-common," however, no longer crystalizes itself in "the images of a King, a Father, a God, a Nation, a Republic, a People, a Man, or a Humanity, or even a Democracy" (Ibid.: 27). The post-68 experience of common opens onto a democratic community that is infinitely beyond itself: it is alive only in the activity of displacing, transforming, negating, superseding, and reinventing itself. This formless spirit is inherently "restless" and uneasy with itself in looking, and finding, ways to escape the limits ordained by the inherited codes of conduct, institutions, and practices. Whenever democracy is equated with the smooth and effective management of public affairs, it is destined to become inert, lifeless, compromised, and immersed in the calculations of what is possible and thinkable under given constraints and a configuration of power relations.

If that is really the case, every de facto democracy must come to terms with the fact that it falls short of establishing the final finish of self: but that is not because it is in every single time postponed for the indefinite future, not because it exists only in a virtual potentiality, not because it is always amenable to being criticized and perfected, and not because a really existing democracy does not correspond to the promulgated ideal of democracy (cf. Zweerde 2017); rather, it falls short of itself because self never catches up with itself and closes in on itself as a perfect circle. The structural failure of a closure means that the passage to a subject eventually runs up against the limits *internal* to the actualization or personifications of relation. Self, insofar as it is finite, is never fully in accord with itself. That is why the place of a finite self is that of a finite opening

to infinity, but this infinity is neither a pure infinity, nor a given infinite, nor a virtual infinity, but an actual infinite. Or, as Nancy expounds in reference to Derrida's in/finite *différance*: "the infinite open within the finite" is "the absolute presence of the incommensurable" (Nancy 2010a: 19–20; see also: Mihkelsaar 2020). The self's relation to itself is thus the establishing and maintaining of relation with something that is inherently incommensurable with itself.

While the effect of the sovereign power is to precipitate the infinite in the finite, the democratic spirit of '68 pursues another path: it retraces the question of relation back from the sedimentations of a constituted self and thus exposes the non-coincidence and nonidentity of a finite self. This means that the people is forced to assume itself *in the space of separation*. The "consciousness" of the "people" is a consciousness of separation, and this separation is for instance visible in a gap between a political leader and what s/he claims to embody, "the 'voice' of the 'people'" and an individuated mouth pronouncing this voice or, put simply, every "people" *and* itself (Nancy 1993: 142). This gap is, and is destined to remain, unbridgeable, because the relation of the people to itself is that of separation. Separation undermines the positivity of any identity and blocks from within the self-identity of the people.

4. Sovereignty and Democracy: The Two Heterogeneous — and yet Inseparable — Moments of the Political

The previous sections have sketched out the two heterogeneous logics at work in the "essence" of the political. The first, sovereignty, unifies, posits, finitizes, and finishes, whereas the second, a post-68 democracy, pluralizes, infinitizes, and disfigures. Between sovereignty and democracy, regardless of their incompatibility, the relation is not that of reciprocal exclusion (see also Mihkelsaar 2021). Contrary to what it may seem, the key question is not so much of avowing one at the expense of the other as it is of insisting affirmatively on their point of conjunction. What matters, I argue in this section, is there being a point at which the movement of establishing relation to self is intertwined with that of revealing the self in being separation.

Pursuing this thesis, we must first reckon with the fact that absolutizing either logic yields to the closure of the political, but for different reasons. The site of the political is closed off, whenever the voice of the people is hypostasized in the indivisible and identical and immediate voice of one figure like a (populist) leader (e.g.,

Urbinati 2019), or, at another extreme, the substance of the people is wholly dissolved into the ever-expanding multiplicity of life-forms. When taken separately and pushed to their logical conclusions, sovereignty moves toward the finish of the people's self-constitution in the absolute finish of a figure; and a post-68 democracy is at risk of collapsing into an abstract infinitization of social differences and the veneration of a pure multiplicity. Sovereignty is therefore in danger of substantializing separation—democracy undoing the space of separation in favor of the immanence of the social (cf. Hardt and Negri 2004; Biglieri and Perelló 2012). If the worst comes to the worst, sovereignty finishes with the imposition of a totalitarian subject, while "democracy without identification turns out to be without any *demos* or *kratein* of its own" (Nancy 1997: 108). A way out of such impasse, I think, goes through a simultaneous *affirmation* of the two logics.[4]

What is at stake in the affirmation is that limit point at which the affirmation of separation passes through the figurative inscription of the self; and how the affirmation of sovereignty is forced—in spite of itself—to retrace itself in the space of separation. The two logics subvert (without cancelling out) one another. If that is in fact the case, the subject of enunciation cannot be fully obliterated in what is enunciated; sovereign figurations annulled in the erection of a finite figure; and an order as such ossified in an actually existing order. Which means: the self of the people is tensed to its limits, because every positing is tied with the countermovement of de-positing. Insofar as the emergence of the people plays out in the field of such tensions, the self is unable to take the shape of a substantial subject. The people tends toward the modality of its being, however, without ever arriving at the grasp of itself as the final finish of a subject; or, on the other extreme, without finding itself wholly scattered in the particularistic ways of living.

The interplay of the two logics means that democracy and sovereignty should not be thought of outside of their relationship, since it is their *relationship* that constitutes them. Outside of the relationship we have only either pure heterogeneous multiplicity or

---

[4] This thought seems to run contrary to the claim, in Nancy's latter book *The Truth of Democracy*, that affirmation can occur only in art, science, love, ad infinitum, but not in politics: "Politics does not affirm; it accedes to the claim of affirmation" (Nancy 2010a: 26). Giving place to pursue the ends of fulfilment in the multiple areas of life, democratic politics itself is not the place "where a signification is achieved, realized, and reified" (Ibid.; cf. Prozorov 2018: 6–10). Granting the importance of this insertion, I believe we may still think about politics as involving a distinctive sort of affirmation, which does not start from the point at which is anything given; and which is not carried forward by the assumption of an end point.

pure homogenous identity. The relationship is for that reason more primary than that which it constitutes and differentiates.

The primacy of relationship means, first, that the truth of sovereignty is democracy. This is so for no other reason than that it is in the power of the democratic spirit to grant access to the abyss in every sovereign opening of the people to itself. The sovereign act of establishing relation is an abyssal act, insofar as the people's position of relation to self is not conditioned upon the legitimacy of anything already established (e.g., the law of nature, God). In this regard, every sovereign figuration and fulfillment of relation points beyond itself. As the sovereign, the people must reckon and learn to thrive in an unsurmountable gap between this subject and a subjectivity, the concrete figural actualization of relation and relation as such, the sovereign and a sovereignty (e.g., Nancy 1993: 116; 2007: 96–107). By disclosing this gap, the democratic spirits let sovereignty be what it is: *the infinite self-institution of a finite self*. But the relationship's primacy means that the reverse is also true: the truth of democracy is sovereignty. This is so because the experience of separation is inherently implicated in the fact that the people recognizes itself in the finish of a figure but, and more importantly, it is unable to identify itself completely with any figure. That is why there is always room for hesitations, doubts, and dissent.

To recap: the site of the political is that site where people open to themselves as a people and exhibit themselves in being separation. The people is thus itself only in a difference or gap between the people and itself. What the actuality of this dehiscence conveys is this fact: that there is the people, or as shown below, that there is relation.

5. Relation as the "Reality" — or Nothing — of the People

Having established that the experience wherein a people undergoes itself passes through the double economy of the political, my next aim is to argue that the site of the political is that of a "stage" (*scène*) on which is enacted and displayed what is *real* in the self: that is, relation as the "reality" — or nothing — of the people.

When speaking about the "reality" of what makes the self of the people, one thing should be made clear at the outset: neither people who come together nor the sense of the common is given prior to the proclamation of the people (see Nancy 1998: 92–3, 111–15). The people, if it structured like a self, does not "have" a relation with itself as something that is (or will be) given, be it in the objectivized

forms of the ideal or the factual. This renunciation of a pre-given identity (or identities) implies that Nancy rejects the mimetic idea of representation, which is ultimately animated by "the frantic desire for a "pure" symbolization," that is, for separating a "bad," "distorted" representation from a "good," "authentic" one (Nancy 2000: 58). What drives this desire, as Nancy's critical take on Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* in *Being Singular Plural* (2000) illustrates, is a view that the task of political representation is to break through the spectacle of distorted representations to the "objective" truth of a social reality and reproduce it as accurately as possible.

Against this mimetic account, Nancy suggests envisioning the being of the social as rotating exclusively around its symbolic axis. Once the intelligibility of the social is in the order of the symbolic, the "reality" of the people consists in articulating the mode of being together and sharing a space-time, setting up a figural symbol in accordance with which people are with one another (Ibid.: 65). To elucidate this claim, Nancy refers to Rousseau "who stipulates that the best spectacle, and the only one that is *necessary*, is the spectacle of the people itself, assembled in order to dance around the tree they have planted as their own proper symbol" (Ibid.: 68–69; emphasis added). The planting of a tree, or the making of a social contact, is envisaged as a "stage," on which multiple singularities enter into a contract with one another to establish the identity of self. Whether acknowledging and rejoicing it, or alternatively, rejecting and repressing it, the presence to itself of the people in the spectacle is not that of fullness but of separation.

This deprived form of presence, as shown above, arises from how the logic of sovereignty is intertwined with that of a post-68 democracy. This intertwinement undercuts one-sided attempts to appropriate the presupposition of self by itself or, alternatively, to celebrate (or condemn) the dissolution of a substantivist subject. This tension within the political is more significant because it provides an opportunity to discern a difference between the people and itself as "the différ*a*nce of being or, more exactly, *the différance being is,*" that is to say, to discern the actuality of existence: "that there is the being," or in terms of what concerns us here, that there is the self of the people (Nancy 1997: 27–28). This "that there is" brings to light self as tending toward the form or modality of its own being, toward the being-such of every self and thing. As a kind of form, the being of self presents itself as what it is *as such* before every concrete fulfillment of self (Nancy 2000: 94–95). But as such, self has no specific content; it is in excess over its determinacy.

Such exposure to an excess is an exposure to something in the order of negativity.[5] The negativity of which the self of the people is made of is not an origin or material of the creation (theology). But nor are we dealing here simply with a substantialized nothing (i.e., nihilism), nor with a pure negativity (i.e., the negation of a popular identity), nor with the negativity of nothingness (i.e., the negation of the people as a being), nor with a dialectical negativity (i.e., the appropriation of exteriority). Instead, it is the question of negativity that is *not at work* and can be affirmed in itself (Nancy 2000: 91). But what does Nancy mean by affirming the negative in itself or self as such?

The sense of this negativity becomes somewhat more comprehensible if we grasp that the people's self-constitution depends upon nothing external, namely, it "is entirely delivered over to itself, insofar as precisely, the "itself" neither precedes nor founds it but is the *nothing*" (Nancy 2007: 103). Nothing, Nancy adds, is "*the very thing* of *the reality* of the people: its nature as nonfoundational, nontranscendent (at least in the usual sense), nonsacred, non-natural, etc." (Ibid.: 104). This is what is silently passed over and repressed in the theologico-political glosses of founding figures such as "originary violence, the founding hero, the royal race, imperial glory, the soldier's sacrifice" (Nancy 2000: 132). When founding acts are no longer justifiable with reference to the traditional authority of any outside power like a church, "people" are wholly autonomous in creating themselves as a people. In contrast to theology, where a creator, a god, produces ex nihilo (i.e., still out of "something") and where the creator is opposed to the created, nothing — *including nothing itself* — pre-exists the self-determination of the people (Ibid.: 16).

If we want to get nearer to the negativity of nothing, we need to pursue the inquiry further and observe what takes place in the staging of the people. Staging is a spectacle, but one that neither reflects some "deeper" truth or idea, nor produces the mimetic representation of an objective reality, nor moves toward the appropriation of a proper self by itself. Nor does the spectacle function as a mirror, in which people can recognize themselves as a subject that runs the show behind the scenes. The reality of the spectacle resides not so much in the end product of tying the social tie, as in "the act that brings it [the people] to be — not in the sense that it produces it (as a result), but rather in the sense that "Being" remains wholly within the act and in the exposition of the act" (Nancy 2000: 69). Thus, it becomes possible for the people to exhib-

---

[5] On the history of negativity as a concept in Western thought, see Magun (2013).

it what it is as such: that it is nothing but the very act of relating itself to itself. The experience of relation concerns the very fact that something like the "people" takes place or appears. The sense of this appearing is not rooted in the space of substantiality and subjectivity. The spectacle conveys nothing but that: *appearing*. The staging of the people is for that reason the staging of the nothing (*rien*). The negativity of this *rien* is for Nancy the *res*, the "thing itself," which means the passage, the void of an opening, whence the people emerges (Nancy 2007: 102).

6. The Political as the Site of the Actualization of Relation as such

Looking back at the previous section, an alluring impression may arise in one's mind that the experience of relation pushes the political to the extreme point of completion and exhaustion. For if it is true that self is deprived of substantiality and conceived in the modality of appearing, it looks as if people come to symbolize themselves in accordance with the consummated figure of all foregone figures: with the figure of nothing. With that respect, the emptied-out site of the political becomes absolutely full of its emptiness. This is one possible way in which the voided site "remains occupied, encumbered by this very void" (Nancy 2000: 135, 138–40; 1997: 110). To contest this reading, this section explains how Nancy distances himself from Claude Lefort's view on the political. What is at stake in their debate is a strategy of how to relate to and hold out the emptiness as such.

Let us begin our inquiry with Lefort's article "The Question of Democracy" which addresses the symbolic mutation of power resulting from the transition from monarchy to democracy. In the ancien régime, Lefort claims that the body of the monarch unified the realm of the worldly with that of the otherworldly and, in doing so, incarnated the substantial unity of the kingdom, "in such a way that the hierarchy of its members, the distinction between ranks and orders appeared to rest upon an unconditional basis" (Lefort 1988: 17). As a result of democratic revolutions, things are taken to change fundamentally: there is no longer any figure that can embody the "natural" unity of community. Symptomatically this is visible in the "flesh" of a democratic society, for example, in how: political conflict is ineradicable; socio-political processes are temporalized; political power is dispersed, distributed. Such signs point toward one thing: the "locus of power becomes *an empty place,*" which means democracy is *symbolically* unpresentable, formless or "infigurable"

(Ibid.). In political modernity, there is no figure especially suitable for incarnating and "naturally" actualizing society. Claiming that, Lefort does not mean to say that this "disincarnation" undoes power and gives away to anarchy. Even though the figure of the monarch is effaced, the place of power remains, and it remains as a vacant site.

While modern democracy is considered by Lefort as emerging from the disincarnation of society, Nancy argues that, as shown above, the figure of the monarch can also deconstruct itself *from within* and thus gestures in the direction of democracy. The different relationship to the monarch has significant ramifications for the strategy of how to hold out in the emptied-out site of the political or in the voided place of self. In an interview with Peter Engelmann, published under the title *Democracy and Community*, Nancy rejects Lefort's solution, his "very American way" of speaking about democracy that demands dispensing "with the symbolic presence of democracy in the same way one dispenses with a cult of personality" (Nancy and Engelmann 2019: 59). With a comparison like this, Nancy suggests that there is no straight way to do away with the injunction of figuration. The manner in which Lefort is anxious about the need of political representations turns democratic society into something unrepresentable, infigurable, untouchable, and ineffable. In theology, such syntagmas are tied up with "an entire economy of the sacred, sacrificial, hierarchical, and hierophantic" (Nancy 2000: 48). If this is so, Lefort overcomes this by inverting the tradition of political theology by inverting the satiated presence of figures into the absence of all figures; by inverting the fetishism of a figure into that of an empty place. Such inversion remains trapped on the horizon of what it seeks to escape, and thus reinstates political theology in the mode of negative theology (Ibid.: 138; see also Devisch 2011).

In response, Lefort retorts that he is interested not in reinstating the political form of negative theology, but in endorsing — like Nancy — the structural non-coincidence of the people. As the symbolic identity of the people is never fully transparent to itself in the presence of a figure, people are faced with an exigency to figure out who (or what) is here and is now called the people. Notwithstanding the this retort's plausibility, Nancy continues insisting that the manner in which Lefort speaks of democracy sets up the "interdiction of representation" as the sort of law, the law of the infigurable. As this law denies or covers over the point of its emergence, it is prone to run "the risk of revealing itself as completely oppressive and terrifying, if not terrorist" (Nancy 2000: 48). What may come to be tauntingly oppressive in this interdiction is that it can be without any trouble, and perhaps even without it being noticed, applied

to establish, sustain, and justify the forms of domination in the disguises of, for example, humanitarian moralism or exploitative capitalism. The naïve renunciation of building any monument in the empty place of power is paradoxically in danger of facilitating the ruses and machinations of power.

By elevating the infigurable into the position of the law, Lefort's relationship with the empty place of power takes an aporetic turn, in that he is at the risk of filling in the void with emptiness and, in doing so, blocking access to the emptiness as such. Democratic society is realized in the infigurable, but in such a manner that the infigurable is delimits the presentable *from the outside.* To distinguish the order of the infigurable from that of the presentable and, further, to make the first into the negative foundation or law for the second is to turn the structural absence of an intelligible representation into the condition of im/possiblity for the incessant foundation of social formation (cf. Laclau 2007). To counter this strategy, it seems to me that the key question to ask is: What is the status of the infigurable? From my point of view, Nancy envisages the unpresentable as presentation itself, the ineffable as saying itself, the infigurable as *figuration itself* (e.g., Nancy 2000: 62). What is at stake here is not, as in Lefort, the need to uphold and safeguard the infigurable as the law, but the structural non-coincidence of every figuration and a political representation. The urgent task is not to separate the infigurable and elevate it to the status of law, but to let the infigurable attain the form of presence, to let people take satisfaction from the infigurable as their own presentability or figurability as such.

To undergo the experience of presentability as such, one cannot favor, as Lefort does, the logic of democracy over that of sovereignty. While Lefort shies away "from erecting a monument to democracy on the Champ de Mars or making reference to it in a positive fashion," Nancy takes an opposite route by arguing that the finish of an infinite self-constitution through the erection of a finite figure is structurally necessary (Nancy and Engelmann 2019: 60). This means: it is through — and only through — the figural fulfillment of relation that it is possible to catch an insight into the non-coincidence of every people, the difference between the people and itself. Or, more precisely: it is impossible to conceive democracy outside of the relationship with sovereignty (and vice versa). It is through the double movement of positing and depositing that it becomes possible for the people to grasp what is real in it, that is, to grasp the actualization of relation as such. The actuality of relation displays representability as such. Hence, for the people to hold out in the

empty place of the political and assume responsibility for what is real in it means to engage in the movement of establishing relation to self and retracing itself in being separation.

Contrary to what one is inclined to assume, relation's actualization is unlike any other theologico-political actualization of an enclosed subject that has come before, in that it does not desire to set up the latest addition to the succession of figures; nor can it be reduced to the completion and exhaustion of the philosophico-political tradition in the nihilism of nothing. While the political theology of modern politics is built around the pre- or post-supposition of subject and thus presumes the non-political solution to the self-constitution of subject, Nancy's affirmation of relation is a political affirmation, in the sense that it involves both the affirmation of sovereignty and that of democracy and so renders visible the self of the people as a *non-given* relation that needs yet to be tied. The Janus-faced economy of the political is what gives and keeps free the site of the political for the in/finite self-inscription of the people.

References

Biglieri, Paula, and Gloria Perelló (2012). "On the Debate around Immanence and Transcendence: Multitude or the People." *Cultural Studies* 26.2–3: 319–29.

Dejanovic, Sanja (2015). *Nancy and the Political*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Devisch, Ignaas (2011). "Nancian Virtual Doubts about 'Leformal' Democracy: Or How to Deal with Contemporary Political Configuration in an Uneasy Way?" *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 37.9: 999–1010.

Eaghll, Tenzan (2014). "Jean-Luc Nancy on Sovereignty and the Retreat of the Christian God." *Res Publica* 17.2: 421–34.

Fraser, Nancy (1984). "The French Derrideans: Politicizing Deconstruction or Deconstructing the Political?" *New German Critique* 33: 127–54.

Hegel, George W. F. (1996). *Philosophy of Right*. Trans. S. W. Dyde. New York: Prometheus Books.

James, Ian (2006). *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Laclau, Ernesto (2005). *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.

Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe, and Jean-Luc Nancy (1997). *Retreating the Political*. Ed. Simon Sparks. London: Routledge.

Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe, and Jean-Luc Nancy (1990). "The Nazi Myth." *Critical Inquiry* 16.2: 291–312.

Lefort, Claude (1988). "The Question of Democracy." In *Democracy and Political Theory*. Trans. David Macey, 9–20. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Magun, Artemy, (2013). "*De Negatione*: What Does It Mean to Say No?" *Stasis* 1.1 (2013): 6–41.

Mihkelsaar, Janar (2020). "Experiencing and Saying the Finitude of Language in Heidegger and Derrida." *Symposium* 24.1: 26–49.

Mihkelsaar, Janar (2021). "Autoimmune Aporia of Democratic Sovereignty." *Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Philosophy* 41.1: 94–113.

Nancy, Jean-Luc (1992). "La Comparution/The Compearance: From the Existence of 'Communism' to the Community of 'Existence'." Trans. Tracy B. Strong. *Political Theory* 20.3: 371–98.

Nancy, Jean-Luc (1993). "The Jurisdiction of the Hegelian Monarch." In *The Birth to Presence*, 110–42. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Nancy, Jean-Luc (1997). *The Sense of the World*. Trans. Jeffrey S. Librett. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Nancy, Jean-Luc (2000). *Being Singular Plural*. Trans. Robert D. Richardson. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Nancy, Jean-Luc (2007). *The Creation of the World or Globalization*. Trans. Francois Raffoul. Albany: SUNY Press.

Nancy, Jean-Luc (2010a). *The Truth of Democracy*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. New York: Fordham University Press,

Nancy, Jean-Luc (2010b). "On Finitude and Sovereignty." *Critical Legal Thinking*, 15 September 2010. https://criticallegalthinking.com/2010/09/15/on-finitude-and-sovereignty-jean-luc-nancy/.

Nancy, Jean-Luc (2011). "Finite and Infinite Democracy." In *Democracy in What State?,* trans. William McCuaig, 58–75. New York: Columbia University Press.

Nancy, Jean-Luc, and Peter Engelmann (2019). *Democracy and Community*. Trans. Wieland Hoban. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri (2004). *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. London: The Penguin Press.

Prozorov, Sergei (2018). "A Thousand Healths: Jean-Luc Nancy and the Possibility of Democratic Biopolitics." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 44.10: 1090–1109.

Raffoul, François (2015). "The Event of Democracy." In *Nancy and the Political*, ed. Sanja Dejanovic, 88–115. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Urbinati, Nadia (2019). *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Zweerde, Evert van der (2017). "Theorizing Democracy as a Quality, Reality, and Ideologeme." *Stasis* 5.1: 248–69.