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Infrapolitical Action: The Truth of Democracy at the End of General Equivalence.

I. Introduction

Jean-Luc Nancy refers to general equivalence, in his short book La communauté affrontée (2001), a bit counterintuitively: "What arrives to us is an exhaustion of the thought of the One and of a unique destination of the world: it exhausts itself in a unique absence of destination, in an unlimited expansion of the principle of general equivalence, or rather, by counterblow, in the violent convulsions that reaffirm the all-powerfulness and all-presentiality of a One that has become, or has again become, its own monstrosity" (12). Only a few pages later he speaks about the increasing "inequality of the world to itself," which produces a growing impossibility for it to endow itself with "sense, value, or truth." The world thus precipitously drops into "a general equivalence that progressively becomes civilization as a work of death;" "And there is no other form in the horizon, either new or old" (15). If the loss of value organizes general equivalence, it is the general equivalence of the nothing. Nancy is talking about nihilism in a way that resonates with the end of Martin Heidegger's essay "The Age of the World Picture," where Heidegger discusses "the gigantic" as the culmination of modern civilization in order to say that quantitative-representational technology can also produce its own form of greatness. It is at the extreme point of the gigantic that general calculability, or general equivalence, projects an "invisible shadow" of incalculability ("This

incalculability becomes the invisible shadow cast over all things when man has become the subiectum and world has become picture” [Heidegger 72]]).

Heidegger’s invisible shadow could be compared with Nancy’s hint of “an obscure sense, not a darkened sense but a sense whose element is the obscure” (20). Let me risk the thought that this obscure sense, as the invisible shadow of an undestined world, is for Nancy the wager of a radical abandonment of the neoliberal world-image, a notion that has become commonplace in political discourse today. But we do not know towards what yet—the invisible shadow within nihilism that projects an obscure sense out of nihilism is a political alogon whose function remains subversive, but whose sense remains elusive.

In The Truth of Democracy (2008) Nancy says that, in 1968, “something in history was about to overcome, overflow, or derail” the principal course of the political struggles of the period (15). This statement is probably not meant to be understood as springing from any kind of empirical analysis. Rather, the book makes clear that “something in history” is precisely the truth of history, understood as the epochal truth of history along classically Heideggerian lines (“Metaphysics grounds an age in that, through a particular interpretation of beings and through a particular comprehension of truth, it provides that age with the ground of its essential shape. This ground comprehensively governs all decisions distinctive of the age” [Heidegger, “Age” 57]). There was a truth that the Europeans, for instance, could only obscurely perceive under the veil of a “*deception*,” and such a truth is, for Nancy, the truth of democracy that titles his book. My contention is that Nancy’s insistence on that truth of history, or truth of democracy, preserves a Hegelian-

Kojévian position that Nancy proceeds to overdetermine from a critique of nihilism. In other words, for Nancy, a truth of history was about to overcome and derail the main course of political struggles from the left in 1968, and it was the event of true democracy, only accessible on the basis of an opening to an epochal mutation of thought whose necessary condition would have been, would be, the renunciation of the principle of the general equivalence of things, infrastructurally represented by the Marxian Gemeinwesen, money, as the unity of value and as generic unity of valuation. The truth withdrawn under the veil of disappointment is the possibility of overcoming the nihilism of equivalence. Such is the modification Nancy imposes on the Kojévian thematics of the end of history, which now becomes understandable as the history of nihilism. Against it Nancy wants to offer a new metaphysics of democracy. Nancy's understanding of democracy coincides with his "obscure sense" of the incalculable. In this essay, I will try to explain it, first, and then raise a question at the end.

II. Hyperneoliberalism

Post-1968 world politics, or even European politics, have, however, not been particularly concerned with the truth of democracy, although it is possible to offer a sympathetic reading and contend that they have had a lot to do with nihilism and with its apotropaic containment. I think it can fairly be said that neoliberalism, which is the properly triumphant sort of world politics over the last forty years, was considered, by mainstream opinion in the West, in its political dimension, primarily the organizer of a politics of lesser evil, therefore essentially an apotropaic politics, a

politics of containment and averting, and at the same time, on its biopolitical side, essentially an entirely positive management of life and the life-force, congruent with some projected sense of nature, and more or less inadequately managed by us insofar as we chose, precisely, to manage it, to bridle it, to restrain it and control it. Let me take it for granted that the neoliberal pretense of non-interference in market affairs, for instance, is a form of management, and so is the ongoing corporatization and subalternization of middle-class, white-collar labor—the committed neoliberals prefer more management in that sense, more management of economic non-management for instance, and an increased corporatization and subalternization of labor, and others, the disaffected, less of it, that is, more intervention, either straightforward managerial intervention on the part of state agencies, or intervention of an apotropaic nature (for instance, against the corporatization and subalternization of working life).¹ Actually existing state politics have wavered between variously programmatic implementations of either political or biopolitical aspects of neoliberalism, and were interested in either promoting its radicalization, on the right, or, on the left side of the spectrum, through the critical meliorism that has constituted the latter's fundamental limit over the last thirty years, in furthering its containment in the apotropaic sense mentioned. Whether on one side or another, from the right or from the left, neoliberalism can retrospectively be considered the patent political horizon of our time up until very recently. But it is unclear it no longer is, perhaps secretly, still our horizon: it is not clear that neoliberalism, in more or less reconstituted form, no longer circumscribes the invisible shadow of contemporary politics even for the left.²

The financial crisis that started in the summer of 2007 has no doubt fostered thought towards the development of alternative potential options. Have these new options gone beyond thinking that a thoroughly resolute new productivization and biopoliticization of society might just be the supplement or corrective that neoliberalism needs, its pharmakon or, to use another Greek word, its true katechon? A question comes up, and it is a double question: if the truth of things is on the side of the thorough productivization and biopoliticization of what is, one wonders whether some kind of hyperneoliberalism, which of course includes fundamental strategies for the productivization and biopoliticization of everyday life, is still thought, no matter how deceptively or self-deceptively, the true response to the evils of our time, to be then supplemented by a doubly katechontic approach for some (this is the "reconstitution" of neoliberalism, such as it may be taking place in Bolivia, or Argentina), or to be given doubly free rein by others (in the United States, for instance, after the substantial failures of the Obama years). I am not sure mainstream political thought has advanced beyond these two options—but perhaps non-mainstream political thought has proved to be equally incapable of moving past them. I want to place my question in the general context of what Reiner Schürmann would have announced, a few years ago, as the end of principal politics in contemporary times--but I will have to leave a reading of Schürmann's Broken Hegemonies for another time. Let me also warn the reader that, here, it is not my intention to produce any kind of an answer, but only to clarify the question to a certain extent, and perhaps propose a further line for thought.

A kind of answer to the question of hyperneoliberalism, either as intensified or else as reconstituted neoliberalism, may have been provided for us in a rather unlikely place, that is, in Lecture 11, pronounced the 15th of February of 1955, as a part of Jacques Lacan's Seminar on "The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis." The issue comes up in the context of a dispute in his seminar in reference to Sigmund Freud's term *Widerstand*, customarily translated as "resistance." A seminar participant, M. Valabrega, insists that *Widerstand*, for Freud, is also "censorship," and not just "resistance," and Lacan strongly disagrees and launches into an excursus on censorship which centers on the discussion of a particularly provocative thought: "if the sovereign is an idiot, then everything is permitted." (Translating it politically: "if the state is an idiot, then hyperneoliberalism is the right, perhaps the only path to take.") It is a sentence from a pornographic novel by Raymond Queneau that of course quotes the better-known passage in Dostoyevski's Brothers Karamazov, where at stake was not the stupidity of the sovereign, but the existence of God. We go from the existence of God to the stupidity of the King of England, and about the former Lacan says: "we analysts know full well that if God doesn't exist, then nothing at all is permitted any longer. Neurotics prove that to us every day" (128). How do things stand, then, with the stupidity of the sovereign?

"Everything is permitted" is obviously a phrase whose desire expresses liberation, even the liberation of desire. What we need to investigate is whether the liberation of desire might perhaps be that very radical evil apotropaic politics tend to restrain us from or whether the liberation of desire, albeit perverse desire, is the

true accomplishment of political aims. For the typist in Queneau's novel no doubt the latter is the case. She no longer denies herself anything, Lacan says. But that is not the case for Lacan's analysand whose story he then proceeds to tell us: "I knew a subject whose writer's cramp was tied, as his analysis revealed, to the fact that in the Islamic law, within which he had been raised, a thief has his hand cut off. He never could stomach that. Why? Because his father had been accused of being a thief. He spent his childhood in a kind of deep suspension in relation to Koranic law. The whole of his relation with his original milieu, everything solid, the judiciary, order, the basic coordinates of the world were barred, because there was one thing he refused to understand—why someone who was a thief should have his hand cut off. Furthermore, for this reason, and precisely because he didn't understand it, it was he who had his hand cut off" (130-31). For Lacan's subject the sovereign was indeed an idiot, and there was nothing to be done in terms of understanding it. But such a fact was not liberatory—he lost the use of his hand to it. As a writer, he could not write. Why? Lacan says: "censorship;" and he says "the law all of a sudden appear[s] to you in a lacerating form" (130). Censorship is the laceration of the law. It has nothing to do with the subject, it has nothing to do with the individual: "Censorship and super-ego are to be located in the same register as that of the law. It is the concrete discourse, not only in so far as it dominates man and makes all kinds of fulgurations appear, it doesn't matter what, everything which happens, everything which constitutes discourse, but in so far as it gives man his own world, which we, more or less accurately, call cultural" (130). I think we can use the latter term interchangeably with "ideology" for the purpose at hand.

Censorship is for Lacan cultural or ideological discourse. Cultural or ideological discourse is censorship. Or, more precisely, cultural or ideological discourse is that which needs to be maintained through censorship, at the risk of losing the very fabric of one's universe. There are implications to this. Lacan says: "any primordial law, which includes the specification of the death penalty as such, by the same token includes, through its partial character, the fundamental possibility of being not understood. Man is always in the position of never completely understanding the law, because no man can master the discourse of the law in its entirety. If it is forbidden to say that the King of England is an idiot, under pain of having one's head cut off, one will not say it, and in consequence of this sole fact, one will be led into not saying a great many other things—that is to say, everything which reveals the glaring reality that the King of England is an idiot" (128). Let us agree that if one loses one's head one also loses the entire fabric of one's universe. There is a price to not understanding the law, and it is a price we all pay. It is the laceration of stupidity, which is at one with the laceration of the law. We call it censorship.

But Lacan says something else. For him censorship constitutes "the final, unexplained, inexplicable mainspring upon which the existence of the law hangs. The tough thing we encounter in the analytic experience is that there is one, there is a law. And that indeed is what can never be completely brought to completion in the discourse of the law—it is this final term which explains that there is one" (129). A final term that explains that there is one? Petitio principii, and therefore an impossible logical figure; an interruption of the principle of sufficient reason given

as an answer and as ground for reason itself: it puts our very political existence, or our politico-cultural existence, under a clear interdiction—we are always already forced into something we reject. Or, in other words, there must be “universal connivance in the idiocy of the Kingdom of England” (129), and this remains at the same time inexplicable and obligatory. Sovereignty holds, as idiotic, through censorship, as an irreducible, final term of what it is to be human (in another passage Lacan mentions Freud’s “navel of the dream” as the utterly incomprehensible point of every dream, “belonging to the domain of the unknown,” which nevertheless, as “the point where the relation of the subject to the symbolic surfaces,” is the very name of being: “what I call being is that last word” [105]), and it is in that very sense that sovereignty is apotropaic and katechontic: either we uphold sovereignty through our very unbelief in it, through our very lack of understanding and rejection of it, or we lose our head, which is cut off. (We don’t really know what happened to the typist in Queneau’s story, but we know too much about what is happening in our workplace on an everyday basis, when, for instance, to go into a rather farcical mood, groups of tenured faculty are asked to vote on a document instituting sanctions up to termination of contract for those of them who do not respond to their institutional emails within a twenty-four hour period. It is not only the sovereign who is an idiot when the sovereign becomes an idiot.)³

But, with that, we may have an answer, or at least Lacan’s answer, to the question about the possibility of a hyperneoliberalism, and to the question of why hyperneoliberalism is at the same time always necessarily placed under a curious interdiction. From Lacan’s perspective, perhaps neoliberalism, in its apotropaic

formulation and even in its apotropaic implementation, is the only conceivable politics today, to the very same extent that the sovereign is now an idiot (and that many of us have consequently had to assume the position of structural idiots.) Hyperneoliberalism emerges as the Lacanian limit of postsovereign politics. Or could a clean break with the discourse of cultural or ideological law be in fact implemented? We would first have to figure out how it would be possible. Nancy's work may help.

II. Anti-equivalence

My question is perhaps already opening up. It will have something to do with the possibility of releasing hyperneoliberalism from censorship, from its sovereign interdiction, from its own political alogon, its very navel. It will have something to do with releasing the incalculability of the invisible shadow, or the invisible shadow of incalculability, so that the notion of an obscure sense may appear. To that extent it will have something to do with what Nancy has called the truth of democracy, to which we will turn in a minute.

The notorious sixth footnote in Chapter 6 of Alexandre Kojève's Introduction to the Reading of Hegel says that Karl Marx picks up on the Hegelian figure of the end of human time, or history, in the proclamation of the kingdom of freedom, which is the moment when humans, "(mutually recognizing each other without reservation) no longer fight, and work as little as possible" (159). But, in the second edition of his book, Kojève included an amendment to the footnote where he says that the kingdom of freedom is not to come, it is already with us, and what remains

is only the extension in space of the "universal revolutionary force actualized in France by Robespierre-Napoleon" (160).⁴

At stake is then the affirmation of the end of history not in any apocalyptic or chiliastic sense but in a dialectical sense. Given the encounter between nature and history the world of spirit becomes embodied, and the future is forever free of the struggle for recognition: what lies ahead is the infinite deployment of spirit in posthistory. Something, however, remains an object of controversy between Kojève's first and second versions of the footnote. In the first version Kojève said that the end of history implied the end of wars and bloody revolutions, and also the disappearance of philosophy, but also that "art, love, play, etc." "could be indefinitely preserved." In the amendment, however, Kojève warns that, if properly so-called man were to disappear, that is, the man of history, then "art, love, play, etc." would not perdure as human activities, and it would only be possible to speak of an animal conduct more or less "artistic, erotic or playful." And that we would become witnesses of the "definitive disappearance of human discourse," that is, not just of philosophy, but also of wisdom itself, given that "in these human animals there would no longer obtain 'a discursive understanding of the world or self' (159-60). The Kojévian vacillation may matter more than any of the two different positions. According to one of them, man, in the historical sense of dialectical man, tendentially disappears, or has already essentially disappeared, but the wise perdure. According to the other one, the death of philosophy is also the death of wisdom through the very annihilation of discourse—only the animal remains. For Kojève this vacillation would open a political sense or destiny at the time of the end of history that would

be at the same time always already other than political, since what is at stake is the fundamental decision on wisdom as destiny versus the latter's destruction through satisfied animality. Both options belong in a region that is no longer political in the Hegelian sense.⁵

We know that Raymond Queneau, the author of the novel Lacan glosses above, was a student of Kojève's and spent much time worrying about the end of history. A fellow student and interlocutor was of course Georges Bataille, for whom it remained unclear whether an end of Hegelian philosophy as a philosophy of work, of "project," would lead to anything but the final ruination of the human. In his second major commentary to Hegelian philosophy in The Inner Experience Bataille mentions his teacher Kojève's reflections on Hegelian dialectics and the end of history but in order to point out that such a "decisive moment in the history of self-consciousness" opens up to disaster: "absolute and circular knowledge is definitive non-knowledge" (108). Bataille calls for "an extreme rupture" with the philosophy of work and the entry into an "unworked" existence, hence opposing the very possibility of a productivization of the human.

But Bataille, like Queneau, remained more perplexed by the other possibility of a hyperneoliberalism at the end of History, namely, the thorough biopoliticization or zoopolitization of life, the conversion of life into animal experimentation. For Kojève, in his amendment to footnote 6 in the second edition of his book, if man properly so-called were to disappear, then a certain return to animality could be expected (Kojève 159-60). And Bataille's "sacred philosophy" or the "philosophy of torment" he invented as the continuation of Hegelian philosophy at the end of

history seems unable to solve the question as to whether its own search for ecstasy, in its very radicalization of the experience of knowledge into non-knowledge, is not also effective and affective animalization. He also lives in Kojévian vacillation. One could say that Bataille's philosophy of torment is the only possible philosophy for hyperneoliberalism as the apotropaic ideology of the end of history.

Nancy's The truth of democracy engages with the Kojévian thought of the end of history at the very same time it means to leave it behind by a reconduction of the Hegelian-Kojévian problematics of recognition into the Nietzschean-Heideggerian theme of nihilism. Nancy proposes in his essay a reinvention of democracy, in the wake of 1968, based upon the abandonment of the principle of general equivalence, and based therefore in the rejection of a certain notion of the common as infinite exchangeability. He also states that 1968 marks or reveals itself as a symptom for a general mutation in the regime of thought that must be understood as the renunciation of principal action in politics, on the basis of a separation between politics as the activity for the configuration of space and the power of "art and love, friendship and thought, knowledge or emotion" (34). Let me note at the outset that the rejection of the notion of general equivalence in politics does not only affect capitalism in the Marxian conceptualization, or liberalism as its ideological superstructure: it also affects, and in a radical way, Marxism itself, which was understood by Marx in the Grundrisse, for instance, as the dialectical overcoming of the principle of general equivalence in its liberal-capitalist formulation, but not as the overcoming of equivalence itself, rather as its

radicalization (which was restrained and limited to mere form through liberal political principles).

In 1968 Europe, Nancy tells us, would have experienced a certain delay in respect of itself, a self-delay, to the extent that the democratic deception (deception/disappointment) brought about by the post-War period could not be conjured away. Europe could no longer understand that it was not, and was not going to be, what it had thought it would become. These statements depend upon a previous one. For Nancy, and he is talking about 1968, “something in history was about to overcome, overflow, or derail” the principal course of the political struggles of the period (Nancy 15). European democracies at the time were democracies without demos, oblivious of their essence, fallen into the lie of exploitation and political mediocrity, without justice and without dignity.

But Nancy talks about a “something” that is coming, which he means is a force about to operate an epochal historical change. Nancy says that in 1968 European democracies were ignorant of the fact that we were about to exit the “age of the world image,” alluding to the Heideggerian essay of 1938 on the world-picture that I have already quoted. Up until 1968, caught up in decolonization struggles or in the construction of the European welfare state as an alternative to the East’s “real communism,” the European left had been reluctant to understand that the task was no longer “to rectify the image of the good subject of History” (20). 1968 would have been the “first explosion” of an exigency to go beyond the parameters of European democracy and its unthought reliance on the (good) subject of the political.

Whatever that something is, it will accord to the Nietzschean exigency of a “deep mutation of thought . . . as the plane of reflection on civilization, existence, and forms of evaluation” (Nancy 21). For Nancy, then, in the 1960’s, or towards their end, a “path towards an exit from nihilism” was opening up, and it continues to be open (21). The Heideggerian undertones point not only to “The Age of the World Picture,” but more precisely towards the 1947 “Letter on Humanism.” Nancy indicates, in the wake of Heidegger, the possibility of a political thought beyond the subject of politics, beyond the subject of metaphysics, through which Europe could assume its destiny in the direction of an overcoming of nihilism. But this is a task that cannot be announced along merely political lines. The traditional good subject of the political is useless here: the subject could have opted, but the portentous mutation of thought is beyond options, as it will happen at a register that is prior to the register of options. In open reference to Kojève and the Kojévian problematic Nancy talks here about an abandonment of “the age of History” (22). So, what does it mean for Nancy to exit the age of history? Are we still within the Kojévian parameters, between the assumption of wisdom and the latter’s animal annihilation?⁶

Nihilism is categorial exhaustion. From it we can no longer develop our politics through coordinates that have been anticipated, foreseen, preconformed to a vision whose regime is now terminally clouded—say, from liberalism to neoliberalism to hyperneoliberalism. The crisis of the subject of the political is paramount here, and Nancy critiques modern democracy as having been always occupied by a notion of a subject with mastery in terms of “representations,

volitions, and decisions” (25): “the subject . . . presupposed by a self-producing and autotelic being-for-itself, subject of its own presuppositions and of its own anticipations . . . whether individual or collective, was now overwhelmed by events” (24). This change in subjectal regime—after the end of the old subject of history, the Hegelian subject that evolves towards its identification with substance in absolute knowledge, history’s goal—is conceivably the torsion Nancy imposes on the Kojévian thematics, following a no longer Hegelian path.

One of the thinkable ways of exiting history was the messianic one, not so much as the arrival (avènement) of a Savior, rather as the event (événement) of a rupture in history, event as rupture and rupture as event (27). The event of 1968, 1968 as event, was an enactment of the “something” that was coming: something came, a rupture. 1968 is for Nancy the introduction and simultaneous celebration of “the present of an irruption or a disruption that could not introduce any figure, any instance, any new authority” (28). 1968 emerges as an affirmation without identification, a mere “desire,” “an expression of a true possibility and thus of a new potency of being” (29). Nancy is suggesting that we should talk about an event of desire, desire as the very form of the event, but desire as a rupture beyond calculation, beyond options, a desire which is already in itself inscribed within the invisible shadow of incalculability and that produces itself as a demand against representational calculation. This is where Nancy places the very displacement of the regime of thought. Because it demands the unworking of calculation, an openness to incalculability, the demand of 1968 exceeds politics, or turns politics

into a region whose mission it is to ensure the possibility of access to whatever is beyond work, beyond the figure, beyond project.

For Nancy the disappointment with democracy is a function of a monumental error of perception datable in the immediate post-French-revolutionary period. Politics must not be conceived as the putting into work or the activation of an absolute sharing (which is the Hegelian conception, also in its Kojévian determination). For Nancy democratic politics, which erupts as if for the first time in 1968, is precisely the separation between itself and another order, “the order of truth or sense, that sense of the world that is outside the world, . . . that does not conclude our existences, does not subsume them under a signification, rather simply opens them to themselves, that is, also to each other” (35-6). European democracy would have forgotten such originary separation—originary because “the demos could not be sovereign except under one condition that distinguishes it from the sovereign assumption of the State and of any particular political configuration” (39). The demos lives in the unworking of politics, and the demotic dimension of the political is, paradoxically, its impoliticity or infrapoliticity. Demotic politics is primarily separation from the common, that is, the experience of the impossibility of the hypostasis of the common into figure or signification. This is the heart of Nancy’s proposal—a proposal I would call an-archic or a-principial. It is from the notion that the division of the common cannot be exhausted by any politics that Nancy appeals to the oxymoron of a “Nietzschean democracy,” that is, of a democracy of distinction that opens the way to the overcoming of nihilism (42; 43). The thesis is clear: if nihilism is the metaphysical drift of history, or the drift of

metaphysical history, and if history coincides with the Hegelian hypothesis of the recognition of the common essence of the human, the rupture of the principle of general equivalence is a sine qua non if not sufficient condition for the overcoming of nihilism. Democracy is not the sharing but the breaking up and separation of the common.⁷ This is Nancy's favored metaphorization of politics: if there is to be a "communism," it would be through a radical distancing and subtraction from any communitarization, including of course the communitarization of production and the collectivization of biopolitical life. The subtraction is fundamental, and the most proper recourse of infrapolitical critique. Against any and all forms of hyperneoliberalism, or indeed of any apotropaic politics of restraint. At the end of the architectonics of modernity, in the post-Hegelian affirmation of the end of history as the end of the nihilism of recognition, Nancy announces an infrapolitical democracy as proper demotic politics. It is demotic democracy, that is, without figure, without people, without hegemony, without an agent of production, and ultimately without a subject: an an-archic and posthegemonic democracy.

There is no general equivalence, no Gemeinwesen, in a democracy that abandons the age of history. But general equivalence would have marked the very conceptualization of democracy since the end of the ancien régime. The epochal rupture of 1968 would have been precisely that: the positing of the end of the principle of general equivalence in democracy. After 1968 the reinvention of democracy must take place on the basis of a "mutation in the paradigm of equivalence" on which the fate of democracy depends (45). In Nancy's own words: "It is a matter of finding, or conquering, a sense of evaluation, of the evaluating

affirmation that may give every evaluating gesture . . . the possibility of not being measured in advance by a given system, the affirmation of a unique, incomparable, unsubstitutable 'value,' or 'sense' . . . Only that exits nihilism: not the reactivation of values, but the manifestation of all values against a background where nihil means that all of them have value incommensurably, absolutely, and infinitely" (47). For Nancy it is not the relativist "everything is valuable" but rather the "nothing is equivalent" that counts and can eventually ensure the end of economic domination, based as it is on general equivalence, and also radical equality, which is "the regime where the incommensurables are shared" (46, 47). The rupture of the principle of general equivalence is the fundamental rupture of the primordial or principal political assignation—it is the condition of democracy, and of its reinvention beyond its hijacking by liberal capitalism and its neoliberal and hyperneoliberal avatars.

Nancy proposes a democracy without a figure. There will no longer be a destiny or a truth in common, but what will be common is the proliferation of destinies that democracy shelters without confusing itself with them. The end of history is the return to the originary moment when the city forfeits the formative-figurative principle in the renunciation of the common as general equivalence. "Democratic kratein, the power of the people, is initially the power of making arkhia fail and then of taking upon itself . . . the infinite opening thus displayed" (57).⁸ For Nancy it is a matter of a civilizational decision for which he reserves the name of Action—a praxis beyond or below principal historical action, where the latter is linked to the work of the Hegelian serf, which is what comes to an end with the

Hegelian exhaustion. I will therefore, for my own purposes, refer to Nancy's Action as infrapolitical action.

There are two more themes in Nancy's conclusion. The first one points to a particular split between democracy and politics. If democracy must, on Rousseau's terms, "re-engender man" and "opens the destiny of man and world to new gestures," politics can no longer offer "the measure or the place for such a destiny" (60). This is why a democratic politics defines itself as a politics in retreat, or what I am calling infrapolitics, having understood its incapacity to assume the totality of human destiny from its ordinary separation from the common. Democracy cannot offer a subsumptible truth, hence it liberates itself from its obsolete characteristic as a politics of ends—democracy is now only the means for its own infrapolitical deployment.

Which means that, in Nancy's terms, democracy is now to be understood more as a "metaphysics" than as a "politics," or first as a metaphysics and then a politics.⁹ But this needs to be understood in a context within which the metaphysics does not found the politics, but simply offers itself as the condition of its practice. Democracy "withdraws from the order of the State the assumption of the ends of man, of its common and singular existence" (63). Is Nancy's definition of democracy as metaphysics not consistent with the Kojévian postulate of wisdom? The wise at the end of history lives in satisfied self-consciousness in so far as she knows that no heroic subjective effort will operate a new dialectical consummation in the realm of ends. A renunciation of ends is the impolitical affirmation of an a-principial, demotic, and posthegemonic politicality, which is what Nancy calls

democratic metaphysics. But we need to understand how such portentous announcements could bring about the active overcoming of the nihilism of general equivalence.

III. Unbury the Always-Already.

Is it conceivable that Lacan, or analytic experience in general, could endorse an identification of censorship, that is, culture, with the assumption and internalization of the principle of general equivalence? Lacan says: “the tough thing we encounter in the analytic experience is that there is one, there is a law.” Can we name that law, at the end of history, as the law of general equivalence? And, if so, would the stupidity of the sovereign survive its dismantling? At stake is no doubt, as Nancy proposes, the possibility of a new, post-nihilist understanding of demotic democracy. This is the obscure sense and invisible shadow of a future that comes from the past, of an “always already” that must make itself manifest. If the very possibility of hyperneoliberalism depends on the “universal connivance” in the idiocy of the sovereign, perhaps the no doubt messianic rupture that Nancy invokes from 1968 points to the remote beginning of a time for the removal of the interdiction of the law. To undo Lacanian censorship, to have direct access to the navel of the dream: it is of course easier said than done.

Bataille devotes to Hegel two fundamental comments in The Inner Experience. In the first of them Bataille says that his work attempts to undo the Hegelian phenomenology to the extent that Hegel’s is a “philosophy of work, of the ‘project.’” Hegelian man comes to be completed and accomplished in the

adequation to the project. But, Bataille says, something in man is irreducible to any project—“non-discursive existence, laughter, ecstasy” would link man to the negation of the project he himself is, which means that man “ultimately ruins himself” through a radical erasure of his human, that is, projective determinations (80). The second passage, already mentioned above, comes in a footnote, and includes a reference to Kojève’s analysis of the dialectics of master and serf in the context of a critique of Nietzsche’s ignorance in reference to Hegel. For Bataille the Hegelian formulation is “the decisive moment in the history of self-consciousness” (109). And self-consciousness culminates in the awareness that “circular and absolute knowledge is definitive non-knowledge” (108). Hence Bataille must indicate a rupture. At the very moment when my self-consciousness reaches its utmost expression, says Bataille, “at the precise moment the question is formulated that permits human, divine existence to enter . . . the most profound way towards an obscurity without return: why must there be what I know, why is it a necessity? In this question is hidden . . . an extreme rupture, so deep that only the silence of ecstasy can respond to it” (109).

Bataille’s rupture breaks away from the philosophy of work and it means the entry into a thought that he variously calls sacred philosophy or thinking of the torment. It refers to an intense meditation—a meditation measured in experiential intensities—on “unworked” existence, that is, on existence beyond Hegelian substantiality. That kind of existence is the region where nihilism can be lived, therefore also the region where, for Bataille, but also for Nancy, the possibility of its overcoming may open up. But the overcoming would not solve the Kojévian

vacillation: does wisdom endure, or does the animal remain? Torment philosophy, in its search for ecstasy, would not know how to respond, since Bataillean ecstasy is at the same time affective animalization and the radicalization of the experience of knowledge.

I think Nancy's proposal for a democracy of distinction, against equivalence, is a wager for the resolution of the vacillation. 1968, as an event of desire, as a maximal politicization of "unworked" desire, of a desire beyond project and figure, initiates the ecstatic movement of the demos, which is for Nancy the secret of history and the truth of democracy. It marks the rupture with equivalence as a principle of administration in favor of the sovereignty of a desire without figure, of ecstatic and unworked desire. No doubt ecstatic and unworked desire traverses the navel of the political dream and points towards the dissolution of the idiotic relation of the subject to the symbolic. It is on this condition that the invisible shadow of the incalculable might be accorded a certain obscure visibility. Nancy says: "not a darkened sense, but a sense whose element is the obscure." Rendering the obscure as such, thematizing the obscure might be the condition of the path forward and beyond the current reconstitution of neoliberalism. It may not be much as a(n) (infra)political proposal, not "gigantic" in the Heideggerian sense. But then it may be everything.

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¹ “Apotrope” is a curious Greek word, as it can mean, in its verbal form (“apotrepo”), turning away in the sense of turning someone away from something, to deter, to dissuade from, but it also means to turn from others against one. Let us take it, for a start, in the sense of “averting evil” by accepting and internalizing a small part of it. I will use it in this paper together with another Greek word, “katechon,” already documented in its verbal form in Homer and Hesiod and Herodotus to talk about holding something in check, restraining, bridling, but whose most famous use as a participle is perhaps in the New Testament: the “katechon” is he who holds the coming of the Antichrist in check, the restrainer in the rather ultimate sense of the restrainer from the ultimate catastrophe, from the end of times. This is the sense that favored Carl Schmitt, for whom it becomes an important term of political theology: the political katechon is the person or regime whose basic value is the averting or restraining of radical evil, hence the organizer of a politics of lesser evil.

² Jeffery Webber has concisely explained, in Chapter 6 of his splendid From Rebellion to Reform in Bolivia, how contemporary Bolivian politics, which could have evolved in a revolutionary direction after the events in the early part of the 2000’s, have now been channeled into “reconstituted neoliberalism,” which we are welcome to understand as constituting the limits of what is possible or in some other way. See Webber 179-229 for a definition of neostructuralist political economy, and the specifics of the Bolivian case.

³ Simon Head’s Mindless. How Smarter Machines Are Making Dumber Humans is very useful to understand the massive attempt by corporate capitalism to turn all workers, including, epochally, white-collar workers into idiots following the application of the Computer Business Systems model to a reconstituted form of Taylorist Fordism.

⁴ My references to Kojève and Kojévianism in what follows are, on the one hand, an echo of Nancy’s own engagement with them in his book. But, on the other hand, they refer to a state of affairs in contemporary reflection that remains, in my opinion, still fundamental today. Jacques Derrida defined it in the first sessions of his 1964-65 course Heidegger: la question de l’Être et l’Histoire as the need to “destroy” in the Heideggerian sense Hegelian philosophy as the culmination of all philosophy in order to open the way for an epochal mutation of thought with implications for the whole range of human affairs. That the epochal mutation of thought has already happened, but needs to be worked out (or, if we follow Nancy’s hint, “unworked through”), was already stated by Hegel, later by Heidegger, then by Kojève in different forms. And Derrida and Nancy pick the theme up. For Derrida, explicitly,

the destruction of Hegelian philosophy must start with the thematization of the ontico-ontological difference in order to shift into a general critique of metaphorization as such (the ontico-ontological difference being just one of the metaphors, albeit inaugural from a philosophical or ontological perspective). See for example his brief “conclusions” to the 1964-65 course, 322-26. I will point out later how the critique of metaphorization is latent in Nancy’s position. But let me also refer the reader to the moment in the Eighth Session when Derrida is comparing Heidegger’s decisive contribution to an understanding of human historicity in Being and Time to the Hegelian one. He says that it would be tempting to affirm that Heidegger’s contribution, “c’est encore Hegel” (282). Kojève, he says, has certainly interpreted things that way. “Good sense and the most immediate appearances seem to favor Kojève, and in a certain way, in this particular case, good sense is never simply right or wrong. But it is rare that it be as right as it claims” (284-85). Derrida proceeds to dismantle the Kojévian claim in 285-293. He would continue his critique of Kojève in Specters of Marx, also there to claim that there is a need for a concept of history, of historicity, liberated from the Hegelian-Marxian, and also Kojévian, understanding of temporality, which links it to a subjectivization of the world that ends up declaring worlding as unconditioned production. Nancy’s presuppositions in The truth of democracy are similar to Derrida’s, and set the framework for their fundamental questions on politics and the infrapolitical.

⁵ Would it be “impolitical” in senses more or less germane to Roberto Esposito’s conceptualization of the term in his great Categorie dell’impolitico? I would prefer to use the term “infrapolitical,” consistently with my own work. On a (critical) interpretation of the difference see Bruno Bosteels, The Actuality of Communism, 75-128.

⁶ I don’t think so, but an adequate explanation of it would require an engagement with other works by Nancy, and notably with his recent La communauté désavouée. In my opinion, which can only stand as such for the time being, Nancy is trying to push his political or infrapolitical thinking along the lines indicated by Derrida’s understanding of the Heideggerian ontico-ontological difference. This is a thought of politics after the “destruction” of philosophy, and therefore after the destruction of political philosophy. Nancy does not thematize the ontico-ontological difference itself, but has already taken it as a particular form of metaphorization. He rehearses another metaphorization on originarity, which has to do with the difference between community and countercommunity. Or let me put it this way: one of the poles of Nancy’s metaphor is no longer being, but the common. But the common stands in a metonymic relationship to being in the Heideggerian sense. The destruction of the principle of general equivalence attempts to release the common from its oblivion as buried origin of the political, not to reinstate it as ground, but to present it as always already withdrawing, always already receding, always already refusing its character as ground.

⁷ The work of Felipe Martínez Marzoa, in particular his El concepto de lo civil, should be mentioned in this connection. I will engage with it in more detail in a forthcoming essay.

⁸ It is useful to provide the lines immediately previous to that quotation, as they include an important reference to Bataille and the Bataillean horizon: “If the people are sovereign, it is incumbent upon them to take into account what Bataille understands when he writes that sovereignty is nothing. It does not come to any person, does not figure in any figure, does not display itself in any stele. It is, quite simply, supreme. Nothing above. Neither God nor master. Democracy means anarchy, in this sense. But anarchy engages actions, operations, combats, settings-into-form that enable the rigorous preservation of the absence of posited, deposed, or imposed archie” (57).

⁹ This is of course a bit surprising, in the wake of the Heideggerian and Derridean destruction of metaphysics that Nancy generally endorses. Why use the term “metaphysics” here? But it would be a metaphysics beyond metaphysics, a metaphysics posterior to the inaugural metaphorization of being as the un/shareable common.