

JEAN-LUC NANCY: AN EXISTENTIAL COMMUNISM¹

Frédéric Neyrat, translated by Arne De Boever

A philosophy's power—its potential—can be measured by its capacity to satisfy a double demand: to correspond entirely to the tradition by which it is carried; and to resolutely detach itself from it. To interrogate this tradition from the inside; and to challenge it from perspectives that are not strictly philosophical. Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy responds to this double exigency.

To back up this claim, I won't propose a view that explores all aspects of this philosophy, but an observation—better: a perspective that intends to show how this thought intervenes in a singular way in our time. One could, of course, tie this intervention to the school of deconstruction, in which Nancy, with Derrida and a few others (Paul de Man, Avital Ronell), is an eminent figure. And indeed, he often uses the term deconstruction, sometimes even as a general title (as in *Déconstruction du christianisme* [*The Deconstruction of Christianity*]). But what, precisely, is the function of such a concept in his work? Nancy would undoubtedly agree with Derrida to say that deconstruction aims to leave room for the impossible, the heterogeneous, the event, or the “to-come” (Derrida). In this sense, to deconstruct is not to destruct but to show that there is *play*—in all senses of the word—there where one thinks one sees only the immovable, cut off from all alterity and alteration. And one also knows that for Nancy, as for Derrida, deconstruction is not a simple critical method, it engages the very heart of ontology, even at the risk of showing what haunts it.² Deconstruction is, in a certain way, the very movement of things, their permanent auto-deconstruction—thus, for Nancy, Christianity produces its own atheism.

However, I would argue that deconstruction is not the final term of Nancy's thought, which singularizes itself through its separation from a new tradition that, however, it also seeks to form. It's not a question of saying that after deconstruction it would be a question of reconstructing, and for a very simple reason: it's construction itself that generates its own deconstruction! *After* deconstruction can only mean one thing: *otherwise—a gap; the occurrence of a bifurcation*, of a new distribution of the intelligence of the world, of another way of seeing the relations between ontology and politics, from a previously unacknowledged view on our religious

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legacies. I will define this other thought as *existential communism*. Far from being arbitrary, this expression reattaches Nancy's preliminary analyses of Bataille, in which the "communist exigency" leads one to think "community" and "ecstasy" together,³ to his contemporary work on communism as the "truth" of democracy. This expression also enables one to give a positivity to the concept of communism, in spite even of Nancy's expressions—"communism without community"—or those of Bailly in his discussion of Nancy—"non-choral communism".⁴ Non-choral, without community: the communism of Nancy is certainly that—but first and foremost, it concerns *the free and incendiary fact of existence*.

I argue that an unacknowledged existentialism traverses Nancy's thought, a *radicalized existentialism*. By this, I mean the attempt to think ontology starting from the being-on-the-outside of everything that manifests itself: human beings, forms of life, and inert things. Transcendence is not the transcendence of god or of the event as for Badiou; it is the being-in-the-world of all the existents, the transcendence of existing itself. Such a radicalization largely surpasses Heidegger's or Sartre's frames of thought, who have limited their theory of existence to "Dasein" (separated from life) or "man" (distinct from "in-itself"). But existences as such are not atoms, individuals closed onto themselves, they are originarily in relation, they singularize themselves because they are together, with one another—in common. It's this *communism of the matter of being* that interests me, both its roots and its political implications. I want to understand how it is different from other thoughts of communism—the "communist moment" of Rancière, the "communist hypothesis" of Badiou—and from the way in which Nancy seeks, in his most recent works, to tie a politics to it.

Existential communism would be the syntagm that, in Nancy's thought, stands out in our epoch. And it does so in three ways:

1/ Nancy's thought pursues the critique of a modernity: that which has posited the human being as an exception, wrongly immunized against its mode of construction of a world that is more and more uninhabitable. The immanent (de)construction of the world sometimes translates itself in the form of Fukushima. To think the "with", the in-common, is to affirm that our contemporaneity demands a first philosophy capable of fighting against every individualism, everything that seeks to absolutely close existences onto themselves.

2/ On the other hand, Nancy's communism, insofar as it is existential, is the antidote to all relational excesses: generalized interconnection of everything with everything can lead to the worst, to epidemics and systemic financial crises, and one cannot simply bet on the virtues of relations to conjure away the perils of modernity. Existence, for Nancy, is only possible thanks to an outside that, inside of each being, relates it to what escapes every relation, all the while being its condition of possibility. *Where interconnection leads to the agonies of contagion, relation demands separation.*

3/ Finally, the outside, the incommensurable, the ek-: all these concepts show the way in which the existential communism of Nancy also enables one to oppose oneself to a bad solution that is fashionable today to fight against anthropocentrism: the temptation to reduce everything that is subject to the status of object, the flattening out of all the differences in the name of the fight against anthropocentrism. What Nancy's thought brings us is the idea according to which the surpassing of humanism must not come about from below (the equivalence of objects) but from above, or rather through this *transversal commune* that makes each existent be always *more* than itself. To what extent this *surplus* can be grasped by philosophy or contests it from within—as an anti-philosophy or rather an *exo-philosophy*—is a question that I will leave open.

It is therefore not a question of declaring the exhaustion of deconstruction, but of showing the exhaustion of a world that doesn't know how to roll the dice of ontology and politics once more. Existential communism designates without a doubt this very thing, namely that the to-come, absence, heterogeneity, and all those concepts only make sense insofar as they make possible, here and now, *living presences*. If deconstruction, as

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Derrida maintained, is attentive to hauntology, to returning and to specters, Nancy's existential communism privileges *in the last instance* the *pulsing of the world*.

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NOTES

1. TN: This is the translation of the introduction to: Frédéric Neyrat, *Le communisme existentiel de Jean-Luc Nancy*. Paris: Éditions Lignes, 2013. *Parrhesia* would like to thank Frédéric Neyrat for granting us permission to publish this translation.
2. I am of course referring to Derrida's "hauntology": Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres de Marx*. Paris, Galilée: 1, 89, 255.
3. Jean-Luc Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée*. Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1986, 22-3 and 28.
4. Jean-Christophe Bailly, "Retour sur la comparution," in Danièle Cohen-Levinas and Gisèle Berckman, eds. *Figures du dehors. Autour de Jean-Luc Nancy*. Paris: Éditions Cécile Defaut, 2012, 60.