POLITICS
Let me begin with some preliminary remarks.¹

In the first place, all critical reflection on the past and present status of political philosophy puts differing conceptions of temporality into play, along with the alternatives that those conceptions subtend. In a recent paper, Catherine Colliot-Thélène indicated that, openly or not, all political philosophy in the modern era refers back to a philosophy of history that mirrors the articulation between rationality and Western modernity.² This remark also holds true for the “returns to political philosophy” that we witness episodically, and most notably right now in the form of what is aptly called neoclassicism. That is why its primary theme is the critique of historicism or evolutionism. But here tradition offers differing models that do not lead to the same conceptions. Re-reading Machiavelli while privileging the theme of *la fortuna* is not the same as doing so while inscribing institutions and power relations in a cyclical temporality. Resurrecting Greek thought while aiming at a new doctrine of *prudentia* is not the same as doing so while appealing to the
horizon of tragedy. There is nothing really new about such choices. They were already present, via the Nietzschean legacy, in the Weberian critique of forms of domination, and the conflict of ethical systems. They are also evident in Althusser’s quest for a critique of historical time, articulating the overdetermination and underdetermination of political action in a trajectory that leads from Montesquieu to Machiavelli by way of Marx (a quite particular Marx, it must be said, since he can be associated tendentiously with either of these models).

In the second place, the debate opposing adherents of social science to adherents of political philosophy takes up antitheses that, in fact, antedate the “birth of sociology,” whether we locate it in Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, Tönnies, or Weber. One clear sign of this is Durkheim’s designation of Montesquieu and Rousseau as “precursors of sociology.” Another is the continuity of a critique of contractual relations: it runs through Montesquieu, Hume, Burke, and Hegel, dividing discourses on the origin of the state from discourses on the foundations of legislation so as to pinpoint a veritable heresy for modernity. But if there is conceptual continuity from the first modernity to the second, over and beyond the revolutionary event (not only French but also American and European) that, as Wallerstein so aptly says, “normalizes change,” there is also an effect of suppression. If, in the second, postrevolutionary modernity, political philosophy disappears between philosophies of the subject and theories of social evolution, it is tempting to think that its comeback (with the crisis of modernity, after the world wars and civil wars between and within sociopolitical systems) corresponds to a closing of the revolutionary question (or even to an “end of the [revolutionary] illusion,” as François Furet puts it). In reality, it would be just as accurate to note that political philosophy translates a new uncertainty as to the meaning of the revolutionary event, and as to its thematic correlates (secularization or disenchantment of the world, individualism and mass society, democratization and the reign of opinion, bureaucratic rationality, and so on), which the discipline of sociology has placed at the core of its descriptive project.

Finally, the unity of neoclassicism is absolutely problematic. If one locates it in the effort to restore meaning to the idea of the polis (or to the idea of the republic), independent of the evolution of social conditions, one sees immediately that the discourse of Leo Strauss is not fully congruent with that of Hannah Arendt. The critique of the subordina-
tion of the political to practical and theoretical sociological factors such as work or social class unquestionably brings them close together. But the diagnosis pertaining to the continuity and disruption of tradition (which represents precisely the complement of philosophy that belongs to history) and thus pertaining to the foundation of individual and collective rights, irrevocably opposes them. Here again, as a result, there is no turning back without reproducing a slide into heresy.

These preliminary remarks lead me to sketch out what could be called an anatomy of discursive conflicts in which political philosophy henceforth has its place, and outside of which the very use of that term would be unintelligible. Political philosophy exists, to be sure, only as a multiplicity of tendencies and objects, the stakes of which are identified by the classical categories of community and conflict, rights and power, legislation, sovereignty and justice, authority, representation, responsibility, and so on. The reestablishment of the link between political philosophy and philosophy in general, by means of categories such as action, judgment, rationality, and constitution, appears to have arisen out of debates that took place in the second half of the twentieth century (to which, from this standpoint, thinkers as different as Arendt, Habermas, and Negri contributed). It did not, however, take the metaphysical form of a derivation of the “political sphere” from anthropological or ontological grounds, but rather that of a reciprocal interaction between reflection on political practice and reflection on the meaning of human existence or of “being in the world.” This convergence doubtless bears the legacy of a complex history, but it can also be posited axiomatically; to do so is to confer on political philosophy the at least apparent possibility of declaring itself self-sufficient. Conversely, it is precisely this self-sufficiency that is called into question in the Methodenstreit that opposes the discourse of political philosophy to critiques of that philosophy. My point is not that these critiques can be seen as extraphilosophical. On the contrary, they will be seen to display the characteristic modality according to which, today, the political object and the difficulty of “thinking” it divide philosophy, and thus help constitute it.

The first and most obvious of these critiques, at least on the horizon where we have positioned ourselves, can be called sociohistorical. Whether or not it is intertwined with a viewpoint on the transformation of social relations (or on regulating, or adapting to, their transformation—this is the point of disagreement between Marxists and liberal
critics, each claiming to represent the realist viewpoint), the critique tells us that making the political sphere autonomous amounts to inverting the relations between part and whole, or between expression and its condition of possibility. Beyond the political phenomena (the state, institutions, the subjectivity of actors), the real ground of society and of history is what must be found. I shall not develop this well-known perspective further.

But it is indispensable to take into account, in addition, an entirely different critique, for which—following Robert Esposito—I am reserving the name impolitics. Instead of opposing reality to representations, facts to values, this critique asks us to pass beyond the position of values (and especially legal values, or forms of legitimization of law or the state, but also of civil society or revolutionary action) and to turn toward the genesis or creation of those values and the antinomies involved in that event or process. It is above all a matter of going back genealogically to the moment in the constitution of the community (and of the very notion of community) when violence and love, order and justice, or force and law appear indistinguishable. This move undertakes to deconstruct the autonomization of the political order, not by subjecting it to relativization, to ontological destitution, but by reinscribing at its very center the nonmeaning or aporia that it must—if it is to constitute itself as a positive, normative, or simply analytical discourse—push away to its edges or onto another stage (as Freud does in his writings on the theory of culture).

The term impolitics—only recently introduced into French—has diverse origins that have given it differing connotations. On the one hand, there is the Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen that Thomas Mann published in the aftermath of World War I (1918, 1922, and 1925), which represented his personal attempt to elevate himself above the conflict between socialism and liberalism in the name of culture and of an ideal Germany (as he had done allegorically in The Magic Mountain); on the other hand, there is Julien Freund’s Politique et impolitique, which ends up deploping the “distress of the political” in parliamentary societies on explicitly Schmittian grounds. In both cases, the term has an essentially negative connotation. In Esposito’s case, this connotation is suspended, or rather, it undergoes a radical change of value. Here, too, the reference to Carl Schmitt plays an essential role, but only inasmuch as it exposes the crisis of political representation (and of any possibility that the po-
political community can be representable) as the end point of the modern movement of secularization and neutralization of the political. More profoundly, then, the term must be referred back to a Nietzschean inspiration, and to its extension in the work of Bataille. The question of impolitics is the question of the negative or the void that comes to inhabit the heart of politics as soon as the substantive absolutes around which the hierarchy of values and the organizational projects (the common good, the divine plan, the will of the people) are suspended or destroyed, even though the transcendent status of the problem of authority or justice or sacrifice cannot be purely and simply abolished in favor of the objective existence of institutions and procedures for achieving consensus. This explains, for example, the privileged role Esposito attributes (in Bataille’s wake) to the critique of the category of sovereignty. The problematics sketched out here has an ethical dimension, undeniably, but what sets it apart is that it grounds its formulation of ethical questions neither in anthropological idealities nor in formal imperatives, but solely in the limits or aporias of the political itself—its sacred part or its accursed part. In this sense, it encompasses work that could include all or some of the writings of authors as different as Foucault and Derrida, Negri and Lefort, Nancy and Agamben.

For want of space to go into all the details here, I shall proceed schematically in two stages. First, I shall summarize a few themes from Esposito’s work, focusing in particular on the essays collected in *Nove pensieri sulla politica*. Next, I shall sketch out a confrontation with certain themes found in Jacques Rancière’s *Dis-agreement*, in order to try to pin down the conflictual edge of the political philosophy with which we are dealing here.

At various points Esposito uses a characteristic formula: “Place the limits of the political at its center, and thus exit from the presuppositions of political philosophy.” From this project two major critical questions seem to emerge. One concerns the freedom that the political community aims to use as its own foundation, to the extent of concentrating it in the sovereign figure of an authentic or absolute decision to be-in-common (let us think of Rousseau: what makes a people a people, in other words, the general will). But freedom as an affirmation of singularities is radically absent from every positive institution of
sovereignty, which can only concentrate freedom by turning it into a nature or an ideal. And such is the principle of a headlong rush forward, in which the succession of figures of power carefully avoids recognizing its own intrinsic relation to death. The other critical question concerns the representation—or rather, inversely, the unrepresentability—of the democratic principle, whether in the form of legal equality, procedures for discussion, or delegation of power. At best, this means that democracy is essentially incomplete, that it exists only in the form of an infinite process, without any rules or guarantees. But we have to see—and on this matter, too, Rousseau is situated at the very point where political philosophy turns into its opposite—that that incompleteness immediately calls for the complement of myth: the myth of a final or original organic community. On this basis, political philosophy as a whole can be understood to unfold as a rational myth, or a myth of intersubjective communitarian reason.

This compensatory structure is already perfectly expressed in Plato, to whom Esposito refers here: “The relevance of Platonic reflection on politics is unsurpassed: an insoluble antinomy, a schism constitutive of power and the good, of law and justice, of form and value, that is projected into the very heart of politics, according to an inevitable discord that tears it apart forever and that no liberal humanism can ever palliate.” Still, there can be no question of reconstituting a Platonism. What the reference to Plato opens up is, rather, the alternative between a meta-politics and an impolitical line of thought, or, alternatively, between a transcendence and an absence of the One that would underlie any reference to community. The meta-political thread is the one that runs from Plato himself to the Marx of the “withering away of the state” and communism, where “democracy is entirely subsumed, but also annihilated, in the power of its own myth.” The One is ultimately represented in the fiber of the social, in the social practice that brings individuals into communication, engaging them in a common work, above and beyond their individuality. The impolitical thread, on the contrary, attempts to assume completely what is left unsaid in the ethical self-sacralization of the state—the “terrible concentrate of power and violence that exploded at its origin.” In other words, this thread’s path takes us through the thematics of the irreducibility of conflict, or division, that Machiavelli, Marx, and Schmitt have bequeathed us, but it prolongs this thematics in a negative politics whose fundamental thesis
is that democracy is *always still to come.* Esposito, referring to the work of Nancy, in dialogue with Blanchot, calls this ground a “presence of the unpresentable.” The oxymoronic expression serves to reveal at the root of democracy a task or responsibility which is not that of exercising civic or political functions, but rather that of accepting an element of alterity or radical noncommunication, without which there is no communication, and thus of considering the community as the opposite of collective security or “immunity.” Community is thereby situated in an insurmountable propinquity of the common good with evil, and political unity with death. The idea of the impolitical is inscribed in a tradition of worldly asceticism, a continual attempt “to belong to one’s time against one’s time” (Bonhoeffer, Max Weber, Canetti), just as it rejoins some of Derrida’s recent propositions (*Specters of Marx, Politics of Friendship, On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*) that establish hospitality to the outsider, “the most unexpected guest,” as an “impossible” criterion for democracy.

It is precisely on the basis of this thematics of necessary impossibility, or of democracy as the limit figure of the politics that resists its own institutional camouflage, that it is tempting to make a connection with Rancière’s recent work. In *Dis-agreement* in particular, which is subtitled *Politics and Philosophy,* Rancière organizes his entire discourse around a dissociation of two terms that are at once infinitely close and essentially opposed: *politics,* which he relates to the demand for democracy, and *police* (taken in the most general sense, that of French classicism, studied most notably by Foucault), which he relates to the institution of consensus. Their common etymology (*politeia*) is symptomatic of the very problem confronted perpetually by political philosophy, from its Greek origins to the recent developments in globalized politics: for example, the attempt to give a normative content to the idea of international community on the basis of the opposition between ethnic violence and humanitarian intervention.

Policing, in general, is a matter of demands; it seeks to give everyone a fair share in the distribution of the common good, by authoritarian or contractual procedures. Democratic politics, in contrast, has as its unique criterion the “share of the shareless”: that is, the requirement of equality set off against social identity or personal merit. We may recall here the young Marx’s celebrated formula from a manuscript dated March 1843, “democracy is the *essence of all state constitutions*,” seeing in
this a direct echo of the way the Greeks construed *isonomy*: “the idea that the specific law of politics is a law based on . . . equality.” In other words, democracy requires recognition of what, in the facts or in the established order, appears at first impossible, and it takes the incommensurable as its measure: “In this way the bringing into relationship of two unconnected things becomes the measure of what is incommensurable between two orders: between the order of the inequalitarian distribution of social bodies in a partition of the perceptible and the order of the equal capacity of speaking beings in general.” It is indeed a question of incommensurables. But these incommensurables are well gauged in regard to each other, and this gauge reconfigures the relationships of parts and parties, of objects likely to give rise to dispute, of subjects able to articulate it. To put it clearly, politics is constituted by the incessant encounter between its own egalitarian logic and the logic of policing, “which is never set up in advance.”

What displays this encounter, and simultaneously turns it back into a radical opposition, is of course the uprising of those who, as bearers of the discourse of emancipation, are excluded on principle by and from the distribution of powers and civic rights, those who appear henceforth not as victims of injustice but as the representatives of a wrong done to democracy itself (according to the circumstances and the era: the poor of antiquity, the third estate and the proletarians of bourgeois society, women and foreigners in modern nations). Once again the definition Rancière gives of freedom is essentially negative, even if it engenders a dynamics, a struggle.

Not only does freedom as what is “proper” to the *dēmos* not allow itself to be determined by any positive property; it is not proper to the *dēmos* at all. The people are nothing more than the undifferentiated mass of those who have no positive qualification—no wealth, no virtue—but who are nonetheless acknowledged to enjoy the same freedom as those who do. The people who make up the people are in fact simply free like the rest. Now it is this simple identity with those who are otherwise superior to them in all things that gives them a specific qualification. The *dēmos* attributes to itself as its proper lot the equality that belongs to all citizens. In so doing, this party that is not one identifies its improper property with the exclusive principle of community and identifies its name—the name of the indistinct mass of men of no position—with the name of the community itself . . . . It is in the name of the
wrong done them by the other parties that the people identify with the whole of the community. Whoever has no part . . . cannot in fact have any part other than all or nothing. On top of this, it is through the existence of this part of those who have no part, of this nothing that is all, that the community exists as a political community—that is, as divided by a fundamental dispute, by a dispute having to do with the counting of the community’s parts even more than of their “rights.” The people are not one class among others. They are the class of the wrong that harms the community and establishes it as a “community” of the just and the unjust.∞Ω

From this starting point, we can see how resemblances and oppositions are distributed. There is indeed something impolitical in the way Rancière develops his radical critique of consensus and the common good (common wealth) or in the way he shatters unitary, identity-based representations of communities: “For politics, the fact that the people are internally divided is not, actually, a scandal to be deplored. It is the primary condition of politics.”≤≠ This also allows us to understand his antipathy for the notion of citizenship in the form it takes at the center of a tradition in political philosophy running from Aristotle to Hobbes, Rousseau, and doubtless also to Kant or Arendt. But on the basis of an intricate discussion of the function of sacrifice, Rancière’s critique absolutely rejects the theological connotations, even the negative ones, attached to the idea of “community of death” inherited from Bataille. In this sense, the tripartite division of negations, or denegations, from which the originality of the discourse of politics emerges, through difference, is resolutely secular. Rancière labels them, respectively, archi-politics (this is, Plato and the project of bringing into being a unified community, a politeia in which the order of laws would converge with nature, or the organic life of the polis); para-politics (Aristotle and, in his wake, all “the normal, honest regime” of political philosophy, whose telos is to transform “the actors and the forms of action in a political dispute into parties and forms of distribution of the policing apparatus” through the search for the “best regime,” the one that contains in itself a principle for regulating or moderating conflicts, an optimal combination of freedom and stability); and finally meta-politics (Marx and more generally any theory that localizes the radical wrong in a prepolitical social structure—as it happens, a class structure—of which the egalitarian political language would be only the ideological mask, destined to
collapse in an “end of politics”). We see that what matters fundamentally is not the unrepresentability of differences, or of singularities, the distinctive features of which make them the objects of a forced “immunization” in the formation of the state, but the unrepresentability of the conflict itself, or of the dispute that takes the status of the “citizen” as its object when the birth of the community occurs.

Philosophically, these are oppositions that cannot be neglected. It is no less evident that, through their very divergence, they disclose a problematic limit of political philosophy—a limit that the return of political philosophy to the foreground, after two centuries during which historicism and sociologism actually or supposedly predominated, only makes more perceptible. Political philosophy, as reflection on the constitution of the public sphere and on the meaning of the kind of life that devolves from it, can no longer give as axioms—neither in a realist nor in a normative or idealist way—the categories of belonging and reciprocity. On the contrary, the uncertainty and, in the extreme case, even the impossibility of conferring a univocal meaning on them have to become the object of reflection about the “common,” even when this reflection seeks to establish modalities for conferring citizenship. We would find preoccupations of the same order in Herman van Gunsteren, about whom I have spoken in more detail elsewhere and whom Habermas wrongly believes he can place among the “communitarians.” For Van Gunsteren’s notion of citizenship as infinite access (“in the making”) presupposes that every political community (local or global) is a community of fate: not a community of destiny, as Renan and Heidegger would have put it, each in his own way, but a community of chance, whose members are at once radically foreign to one another (or, alternatively, foreign to any common cultural presupposition) and incapable of surviving without one another. This amounts to transposing Hobbes’s and Rousseau’s problem, that of a fictively natural prehistory, into a “posthistory” that has dissolved frontiers but without instituting humanity as a political subject. This is also what I myself have tried to indicate previously, not only by identifying the question of democracy with that of its frontiers—in all senses of the word—but by characterizing as “emancipation,” “transformation,” and “civility” the system—a system lacking any a priori principle of unity—consisting of the critical concepts of politics that overdetermine the constitutional question of citizenship.