Emptying Conflicts:
Expropriation of the Common and
Commonality of the Void

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Abstract: *Conflicts can only be solved if the conflicting parties find a common ground, and making peace achieved only by stressing what these parties have in common. And yet every conflict always already implies that there is something "in common": the fight takes place on a common ground and the opponents are united by the same will to possess, by a common object around which their opposed needs come to clash. It might therefore be rather through the absolute elimination of everything held "in common" that conflicts can be overcome, or rather put to work in a constructive manner. Through the works of Rancière, Glissant, Blanchot, and Esposito, the idea emerges that conflicts can be transformed into a positive occurrence through a common struggle to invalidate the logic that determines the nature of the object up for dispute, the existence of the place from which to fight for it, and the role that opponents play in a common political arena. But this perspective ultimately demands that those who fight this logic renounce having anything "in common," save for the constant work of destroying their common identity.*

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The PJCV Journal is published by Trivent Publishing

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> "Theory is absence, obscure and propitious."
> Edouard Glissant,
> *Poetics of Relation*, 129.

> "We should recognize in the thought of
> community a theoretical excess."
> Jean-Luc Nancy,
> *The Inoperative Community*, 25.

I. Conflicts as Accidents

"Peace is made by stressing what we have in common": this widely accepted statement suggests that conflicts are resolved on the condition that opponents find a point in common or a common ground. Yet, contrary to this apparent self-evidence, it is worth noting that every conflict always already implies that there is something held "in common." For each war is fought on some sort of common battleground, and logically speaking the belligerents are two halves of a common unity: they are opposed but united in wanting the same land, the same resource, or domination over the same people.

The main point at stake in such conflicts is that the violence, although deadly, appears to be structurally regulated. This is notably the case of large-scale violent conflicts, such as wars between nations. Such conflicts seem to put things out of balance, and this sometimes unleashes a terrible violence. But, even so, at issue in the conflict is who will occupy which function: which ruler will get to govern a certain land, and which people will have the right to live in it. Still, the very logic of functions and of places, the very difference between the ruler and the ruled, remains unchallenged. Italian plebes in the sixteenth century allegedly said "*Franza o Spagna, purché se magna*" ("France or Spain, so long as we eat"), as the main European superpowers of the time made Italy into their playground: conflicts might bring about a change in ruler, but the relation between the rulers and the ruled remains the same. In smaller-scale social conflicts, one can observe how violence is mainly used to put people back into their supposedly natural place (for instance, the repression meted out to get striking workers back to work or to send immigrants "back home"); if the first type of conflict leaves the logic of places unchallenged, the latter aims at re-establishing it, by putting bodies who wanted to escape their supposedly natural place back into place. Violence, as said, appears in such cases to be structurally regulated, and this is because it aims at achieving domination within an oppositional structure but does not target the structure itself. What remains unchallenged is the very definition of the places and the logic of their articulation; what remains unchallenged is the very idea that a situation is an ordered totality in which each individual/party should occupy a specific place.

It is important to note that, within this logic—that is, as long as a conflict concerns who occupies which function or place at a certain time—the majority of conflicts can be solved: by analyzing the situation, clarifying misunderstandings, and balancing out reciprocal interests, sooner or later the path towards a solution can be found. Such conflicts can—with more or less effort—be reduced by applying rules of language, shared standards of sociability, laws of communities, international laws, or even some sort of legal definition of human rights: one state rather than another gets to rule over a region in line with the rule of ethnic majority; a group of workers returns to work after reaching a compromise in a wage dispute; or certain immigrants are finally accepted after having acquired the working skills or cultural values that make "integration" possible. One can say that in such cases a conflict is nothing but a hiccup, a small or great temporary disorder, in the smooth functioning of social relations, communication, or language.

Once resolved, such cases clearly show that there *essentially* was no conflict. Instead, at issue was the finding of a common ground that needed to be named in a clear way, secured, and stabilized. Once solved, the conflict reveals itself as having been what one can call an "accident," which we can understand in two interconnected ways. First, "accident" names something that took place with striking evidence ("*accidit*") thus imposing its presence as a clash, a conflict, a violent confrontation. Second, "accident" means something *inessential*: that is, something that—as horrible, violent, protracted, or deadly as it might be—does not change the essence of the situation in which it happens. Something happens, but afterwards everything returns to how it was before; the essence of the situation remains untouched. As said, once resolved, such conflicts show that nothing has touched the essential structure of the situation, but that what was at stake was an alteration in the role of who occupies a certain place at a certain moment.

Consequently, despite the effect that they can have, such inessential conflicts do not require much thought. What they demand is that the parties sit down together and apply their rules of judgment, legal definitions, and, above all, some common sense; they demand *something in common* to be found, a common point upon which the conflicting parties agree, if only a common meaning to the words, such as, for example, a shared definition of "state," "right," "humanity," "ownership," or "nationality," that allows peace to be restored via a

shared protocol. But no genuine thought seems to be at stake; this is because, to say it with Jean-Luc Nancy,[1] thought is instead at work on the edge of the void: we are actually called upon to think only when the analysis of a situation yields an insufficient result, when the balance of mutual interests is impossible to calculate, when it is impossible to reduce words to one clear-and-defined meaning; thought arises when no support is to be found in the usual values and parameters of judgment, and arises as a call to question these latter. In brief, thinking only ever occurs at an extreme point when we come into conflict with our own ideas. It can thus be said that for the type of conflicts in which, however hard it might be, the parts can be determined to have something in common, in which a common terrain can ultimately be found by which to calculate, or at least a basis discovered on which a solution may be conceived, thought is not really at stake. The whole paradox is of course that in conflicts in which not much is to be thought, save for the finding of a common ground or the restoring of a good structural order, what is found is the same order and common ground that, as aforementioned, is essentially inscribed within the very logic of conflict.

II. The essence of conflicts

It might thus appear that in the majority of conflicts there is nothing to be thought, as such conflicts amount to a disorder that can be analyzed and overcome by finding a common terrain which the opponents can share in orderly fashion. Conflicts still make us think, however, as is attested by the very idea of this special issue dedicated to conceptualizing them. Of course, the kernel of what is to be thought through in conflicts is their paradoxical nature: on the one hand, their usual resolution demands a well-ordered structure and the presence of something common between the parts; on the other hand, however, commonality and order are found at the very heart of conflicts: most conflicts require a common object around which different wills-to-dominate clash, and they rely on the structural distinction that connects the dominant to the dominated (although the parties in a conflict may aim at reversing who is in which place). One might note, in this sense, that the most pernicious contemporary conflicts, such as intercultural and interreligious ones, seem to arise from a lack of any common ground, from the apparent impossibility of finding anything in common around which the conflictual relation can be neutralized. Understandably enough, this entails an effort to find some common ground and a shared structure in order to show that somewhere and somehow the opponents actually do have something in common and do belong to the same structural field according to which their differences can and should be articulated. The problem is that such commonality is essential to conflict itself: as aforementioned, conflicts arise around a common object, and the belief that a common, shared structure can articulate differences appears to be inseparable from the structure of domination which more often than not is at the very origin of the conflict itself. If there is nothing to be thought through in such types of conflict, it is because resolving them by finding a point held in common leads only to a maintenance of the structural violence of which the conflict itself was a transient exacerbation.

This usually implicit paradox becomes explicit when a conflict comes to appear not as an accident awaiting a solution (whether this is the restoration of the previous order, a reversal in who occupies which position, or a compromise between the two), but when it rather manifests itself as something so essential that the application of the laws of a language, a community's rules, or norms of common sense becomes inefficient. Here a "conflict" is no longer simply a clash between two interpretations about, or two interests in, a common object.

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[1] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 25.

Instead, it appears as a sort of paradoxical moment, the main character of which can be stated as follows: the conflict is brought into the conflict as a conflictual element.

Jacques Rancière has pointed this out in his book *Dis-agreement*. Discussing late nineteenth-century worker protests against the state and the capitalists, he shows that these conflicts appear to be two completely different conflicts depending on the perspective one adopts: from the viewpoint of the state and the capitalists, the stakes of the conflicts concerned wages and work times, while from that of the workers the stakes involved being perceived not as a mass of tired bodies screaming in pain and demanding better conditions, but as persons articulating a political discourse.[2] Indeed, the workers, while demanding better working conditions, also started openly to discuss the laws regulating such conditions; this move, Rancière remarks, displaced the fight from the private sphere of the contract between the workers and the factory owner to the public sphere of political decisions, ultimately imposing something that neither the state nor capital could accept: that workers are not only bodies wanting a better life, but political subjects capable of discussing laws.[3]

Here, it is the very nature of the conflict that becomes the object of the conflict: the conflict is not the same for both sides. The clash over a specific object puts into question the very nature of the conflict, of its participants (who are the workers exactly? Suffering bodies or political minds?), and ultimately of the very situation in which the conflict takes place (is it possible to perceive the workers as thinking political subjects within capitalist society?). Certainly, the workers and the state can find a point of compromise on wages and work times. But while the conflict over the object is resolvable, the conflict over the nature of the conflict cannot be resolved. In fact, only a radical shift of paradigm can make clear once and for all that proletarians comprise not only a workforce, but are thinking persons and political subjects. The conflict is thus no longer an accident that needs to be whittled away, but an essential fracture that calls for a radical reconfiguration of thinking.

When it comes to conflicts that take place as accidents, disturbances, or alterations of a common structural ground allowing for peaceful, orderly relations there is thus not much to be thought; and yet they present an essentially problematic aspect, i.e., the paradoxical nature of the commonality that they imply (both in the sense of the common structure regulating the relations of the antagonists and in the sense of what the antagonists have in common). It might therefore rather be through the shaking, fracturing, or even the lack of any such common ground that an act of thinking is required. Something *essential* may be thought in a conflict exactly when the latter is not an *accident* waiting for a solution. This means that something essential is to be thought when the very common ground upon which the conflict is built is brought into the conflict, when the conflict includes in the conflict the common ground that the conflict seems to have disturbed and shows how this common ground is itself an object of conflict. This is why, as in the example that Rancière uses, conflicts in which the object of the conflict is the conflict itself are so relevant: as aforementioned, on both sides two completely different battles are being waged, and that if the battle over the object can be settled via a compromise, the battle over the terrain of battle cannot: the workers and the state can find a point of compromise on wages and working times, but only a radical shift of paradigms—like a revolution—can make clear once and for all that the proletarians are not only a workforce, but thinking persons and political subjects. Such radical conflicts, in which any kind of common ground is broken, and in which the object or place of conflict is no longer evident, should be taken less as a threat than as an opportunity, precisely insofar as

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[2] See Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 52-54. On the relation between animal voice and political discourse see ibid., 19-21; 45-46.
[3] See ibid., chapter 3, 43 ff.

they shift the conflict from being about a specific object to being about the very nature of the conflict: this shift allows for a questioning of the self-evidence of what is at stake in the conflict, who its protagonists are, and what the rules regulating their relations are. In other words, such conflicts undermine the idea that a conflict is something that has to be resolved by finding a common term and a common structure, and rather point to the inherent conflictual essence of such common terms and structures, which is to say the fact that they actually lack the self-evidence required for any resolution-enabling, common ground.

Moreover, the radicality, or revolutionary potential, of conflicts wherein the nature of conflict is itself the object lies in their structural similarity to thought: we only really think when the values and parameters of judgment no longer support a thought but instead are called into question. Similarly, real conflict emerges only when a conflict over a specific object brings into question the very nature of the conflict, its participants, the object of dispute, and the very terrain on which it takes place. The idea thus emerges that a conflict is essential when it is no longer clear what type of accident, or clash between parts, is at stake. Consequently, it also becomes clear that a conflict is not essential when it gravitates around a proper object that would define it essentially, but instead when it fractures the self-evidence of what that object is. Conflict thus appears an odd object: it is no more than an accident whenever its object can be essentially defined within the logic of the situation in which it takes place; yet it becomes essentially conflictual only when it opens a space of incertitude, whenever it opens a fracture or void within the very system of certitudes and values that apparently allow us to define it. This does not entail a fascination for the violence of conflicts. Quite the opposite, as the violence of the majority of conflicts—a point I anticipated above but will go into in more detail below—can even be seen as a consequence of their lack of radicality: people endure violence when, caught in a war between rulers, their role of oppressed remains the same, not when—possibly through a violent act—they manage to transform a conflict between oppressing powers into a conflict between the oppressed and the oppressors. Violence, in other words, is not per se in conflicts: violence rather occurs wherever there is nothing to be thought; the explosive capacity of real conflicts to undermine the evidences upon which the very place in which they take place is built, is, on the contrary, both a chance for thought and for the cessation of enduring violence.

III. The opacity of essence

That violence lies not in the conflict *per se*, but whenever there is apparently nothing to be thought—that is, in the idea that a situation is an ordered totality in which each individual should occupy a specific place, or possibly be returned to it—is made apparent in the work of Édouard Glissant. In his remarks on decolonization, he stresses how the most enduring violence of colonialism has been the creation of oppositional identities:

> [T]he conquered or visited peoples are forced into a long and painful quest after an identity whose first task will be opposition [...]. For more than two centuries whole populations have had to assert their identity in opposition to the processes of identification or annihilation triggered by the invaders. [...] For colonized people identity will be primarily "opposed to"—that is, a limitation from the beginning. Decolonization will have done its real work when it goes beyond this limit.[4]

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[4] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 17.

One would expect Glissant first and foremost to condemn colonial and post-colonial *violence* and to demand *recognition* for the Caribbean people; instead, what he chiefly finds problematic is the very idea of oppositional identities. As Glissant shows through a back and forth between abstract thought and politically contingent questions, what is at stake in conflict is not only the evident problem of an identity that arises in opposition to another, and is hence determined as negative, but the very idea of defining community by identity. Of course, from a logical standpoint, every determination of an identity cannot but be negative (*omnis determinatio est negatio*); however, what is ultimately subject to scrutiny is the idea that an individual can be identified by their belonging to a category, community, or group in accordance with specific traits (nationality, language, religion, a somatic aspect, wealth, education, and so on), and that different groups form a harmoniously-structured whole, a totality in which each one finds its place (a totality in which "conflict" arises only as a temporary misplacing of such-and-such an element). If this logic is problematic, it is because it is oppositional (each group is defined by what they are not—if you are German you are not "not German"), exclusive (one is Chinese, rich, or Catholic because someone else is not such a thing), and specific (group belonging is what essentially defines the individual).

The tipping point here is that the idea of society qua whole divided into groups according to their identities has nothing natural about it. It is merely the reflection of a contingent set of power relations that has been stabilized to the point that it starts to appear natural: when cemented over time, power relations make it seem natural that a certain "people" identifies with a certain "nation"; that one religion is the true religion, while others are deviations or mistakes to be either tolerated or repressed; that there are rich and poor; and that one's access to education, power, and wealth depends upon their talent. Slavery and oppression would therefore not be structurally different to national or class division, but rather the extreme and most violent implementation of the same logic, a logic for which each individual transparently belongs to a group according to their proper characteristics. Consequently, as intimated above, violence and conflict are logically secondary, since they result from the idea that there is something like a harmoniously-structured whole in which each individual has their own different, "natural" place (their community). From this perspective, conflicts are the means to put people (back) in their alleged places. The crucial problem, however, is the order of the place itself. This is the very logic according to which each individual is definable as belonging to a set. A certain violence stems from the force that decides who has to fit into which group and how the groups are defined (including, in its most violent form, who is a slave and who is free).

At this point, Glissant points up an inverted form of this logic, which he identifies in a small, but systemic, conflictual attitude: errancy, which is to say, not being where one is supposed to be for the purpose of identification. More precisely, Glissant finds in Caribbean history the capacity to escape assignment to an identity by identifying with a certain errancy, one that, in his view, is inseparable from the continuously changed identity of the Caribbean people, qua inhabitants of a land constantly subject to changes, intermixing, and transformations. "The one who is errant," he writes, "rejects the generalizing edict of the universal, which reduces the world to a transparent evidence."[5] Resistance to the violence of classification is, for Glissant, first and foremost an act of subtraction from determination; but such an act of indetermination also has its own logic and movement, and it leads to the

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[5] Ibid., 20.

constitution of a different subjective figure. As Maurice Blanchot writes, it is by "a vertiginous move" that one can finally come to "an "I" free of the terror of identifications, and identical to disidentification itself."[6]

Glissant insists on the capacity of errancy and of subtraction from determination to construct a new subjective position. In an seemingly strange move, he draws a parallelism between, on the one hand, the errant identity of the Caribbean people as a form of political resistance to classification and, on the other, baroque art: "baroque art," explains Glissant, "is an art of "rerouting" or rather "derouting" (*détournement*)"; "baroque art was a reaction against the rationalist pretense of penetrating the mysteries of the known with one uniform and conclusive move,"[7] that would "summarize the world's matter into sets of harmonies."[8] If classicism is an age of transparency, where everything is set into a well-known order of places held together by the central role of perspective, baroque is rather an obscure form of art in which, for instance, the dark tones used in painting enable forms to dwell in the unseen. But such a drive towards obscurity is far from being a simply negative move, an idle absence of visibility. In fact, in baroque painting, sculpture, and architecture, the movement of forms that emerge from the dark while hiding in it takes the central role that the rational organization of forms in a well-constructed harmony of composition had in classicism. As a consequence, things don't find their proper place in a whole, but are singularly defined by the movement by which they emerge from obscurity while lingering in it; that is, being impossible to locate in a proper position determined by a general perspective, objects define themselves by the always singular movement by which they come to appear. Objects are not defined as forms that find their ideal, rightful place in a composition, in a whole, but are rather defined by a singular movement, by a transformation that always remains partially obscure to knowledge. More importantly, it is because it is identified with such a movement of transformation that the essence of such objects is essentially obscure to knowledge: if the essence of something lies its own movement of transformation, then it necessarily includes the infinite stratification of causes, the unpredictability of effects, and the contingency of the present state. Inseparable from transformations, inseparable from the contingency of movement, it is not due to a lack of knowledge but by essence that the essence remains opaque to knowledge, submerged in an obscurity which is one with its dynamic capacity.

Hence, Glissant adds, "baroque techniques, moreover, favor "expansion" over "depth" [...] and "set out to convey" the idea that "all knowledge is to come."[9] What essentially constitutes something is the set of its ongoing connections, not its complete form in a determined position in a whole. In a broad sense, we can call "baroque" any singular moment, point, person, artwork, that somehow remains obscure, or rather opaque, non-transparent to a knowledge that identifies each element of a situation according to the unequal place or exclusive role that they occupy. Such baroque things are defined as essentially "moving on the surface" and "establishing relations." Movement and relations are essential, and inseparable from a certain opacity. Opacity is not a veil laid over a hidden essence, but a determination of whatever is essentially affected and defined by movement, transformations,

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[6] Maurice Blanchot, "The Terror of Identification," in *Friendship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 213-214.

[7] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of relation*, 77.

[8] Ibid., 78. More precisely the quote refers to 'imitative harmonies', any local organization of a set of figures being harmonically constructed as an imitation of an abstract model.

[9] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of relation*, 77.

and relations. Glissant concludes, "What shall we say about composite cultures, whose composition did not result from a union of "norms" but, rather, was built in the margins with all kinds of materials that by their nature were exceptions to the patience of the rules? [...] The baroque is the favored speech of these cultures."[10] Glissant ultimately describes such an opaque determination constituted by errant movements as a "violence of contaminations" inflicted against the violence of the classicist ordering gaze: "we call it baroque, because we know that confluences always partake of marginality, that classicisms partake of intolerance, and that, for us, the substitute for the hidden violence of these intolerant exclusions is the manifest and integrating violence of contaminations."[11]

If baroque logic is thus a conflictual one, it is because, by defining things in terms of their transformations and contingencies, it radically separates the idea of "essence" from the thought of a totality that is finitely divisible into a series of sets whose character would determine the essence of an individual's belonging (e.g., society is a set of communities, and individuals are essentially defined by the attributes of the community to which they belong). In such a "baroque" perspective, essence is therefore not equivalent to what Aristotle would call "second substance" (the predication of the general in the individual, which determines the form, and hence the essence, of the latter),[12] and is thus absolutely singular, that is—and herein lies the logical paradox—it corresponds to the accidental, contingent transformations that define its singularity. The essence of a baroque entity is hence opaque to the knowledge of the individual understood as an element of a well-organized whole. As such, it not only resists the transparency of knowledge, but with its obscurity also punches a hole in the transparent logic that is supposed to grasp it as an element of a totality—with its obscurity it punches a hole in the idea of a beautiful world that is organized in parts which can and should be regulated harmoniously, and in whose relation emergent conflicts are to be regulated.

Rooted in the relation of the essence and the singular, this definition of "baroque" nonetheless does not renounce the idea of universality: the identification of essence with an opaque movement of errancy can be universally predicated. This model, rather than oppose universalism, counters any identification of the universal with the idea of a totality organized as a finite set of specific classes. Its aim is to show how any definition of the essence of the individual as the bearer of the natural characteristics of a specific class is necessarily related to a transparent logic of totality: in political terms, the definition of the identity of an individual according to their belonging to a class, group, community, or set (even a resisting or oppositional one) ultimately depends on the orderly distribution of a totality, which in its turn is the ideological stabilization of a set of contingent relations of force (in this case colonialism), of which such an idea of totality is the expression. Singular points, provided with an opacity that witnesses their "baroque" essence, hence display a conflictual nature that consists in imposing a certain opacity on the will to transparency that is contained in the logic which divides a situation into a set of well structured, oppositional, and exclusive parts according to positive criteria such as class, wealth, race, or religion. From this perspective, the universal trait of the singular is to be always inseparable from its capacity to de-identify with the specific.

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[10] Ibid., 91.
[11] Ibid., 91.
[12] See Aristotle, *Categories* 5, 2a10 ff, and Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Z1, 1028a10 ff.

IV. The Litigiousness of Essence

Jacques Rancière has widely stressed this point, remarking how politics stems exactly from such singular moments of fracture, in which something controversial appears that cannot be accounted for—something that not only appears as conflictual or unacceptable, but cannot even be correctly recognized and named. Politics has hence to be understood as radically different from a well-polished and policed order of administration of society in which each individual receives a place according to the group to which they belong, in which each group is given a place according to their character, is protected in such position and is prevented from occupying the positions belonging to other groups.[13] The seminal example that he provides of this is from Aristotle's *account* of ancient Athens' organization. Following the logic of "geometric harmony" inherited from Plato, society is thought as a totality in which each group receives a place according to what the group brings for the common good. According to a quite transparent logic, then, nobles are recognized as a class thanks to the virtue and strength that they bring to society and that thus constitute their defining characteristics; rich traders and producers are recognized as a part thanks to the wealth that they bring to society and that thus constitutes their defining characteristic. Here we find a model of a society based on measure and proportion that runs through the veins of twenty-four centuries of European philosophy. This model seems to be a recipe for eternal peace: should any disagreement arise, the parties should sit down and sort out the right measure of things, what belongs to whom, and who belongs to which place.

Unfortunately, as noticed by Rancière, things are not so simple. When Aristotle moves to analyze the next class, the *demos*, or people, it appears that the count hides a fundamental "miscount," thus introducing a radical "wrong":[14] as the *demos* is counted as a part of the social whole, something "wrong" appears and ruins the calculation. According to Aristotle, freedom is in fact the *demos's* defining characteristic, what the people brings to the community. But, Rancière observes, such freedom has two characteristics: first, "it is not proper to the demos at all,"[15] as the citizens of other classes are free as well. The *demos*, the people, the working class, has actually nothing of its own to contribute to society: "they are nothing more than the undifferentiated mass of those who have no qualification—no wealth, no virtue—but who nonetheless enjoy the same freedom as those who do."[16] Secondly, and more fundamentally, Rancière observes: "the freedom of the demos is not a determinable property, but a pure facticity"[17] and more precisely a relation of force: it happens that in Athens "people" are free mainly because they have enough strength to oblige the rich, contrary to the prevailing custom, not to reduce their debtors (who largely belong to the *demos*) to slavery. The *demos* is free simply because (or if, when) it is strong enough to prevent its possible reduction to slavery.

If a wrong is established here it is because the idea of a good partition of society, regulated by a geometric or proportional equality in which each group finds a place and a role according to the proper character that defines it and by which it contributes to the common good,

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[13] For a more precise understanding of this topic and of Rancière's differential definition of "politics" and "police," see Jacques Rancière, "Ten Thesis on Politics," in *Dissensus* (London: Bloomsbury 2011), pp. 27 ff., and Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics* (London: Verso, 1995), *passim*.

[14] See Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, 6. The exact sentence is "a count whose complexities might mask a fundamental miscount, a miscount that might be the *blaberon*, the very wrong that is the stuff of politics."

[15] Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, 8.

[16] Ibid., 8.

[17] Ibid., 7. Translation modified.

appears to come unhinged. Devoid of any title or anything proper and specific, the *demos* wrongfully finds its place as a countable and accountable part of the whole: in fact, what composes the *demos* is just people in a generic sense, a people with no title or positive quality that would make an identifiable group out of them. The paradox of the "people" (of what is "wrong" with it) is that, identified as a group, it is yet nothing but the name of the undifferentiated mass with no specific title to identify them, of the mass that bears no proper, clear and exclusive contribution to society. Bringing a freedom that everyone already has, the *demos* has as its "proper character" a sort of flat equality (the fact that everyone is free) which makes no sense in this societal division. At the same time, bringing a freedom that already belongs to the other classes as if it was their own "proper attribute" and that actually belongs to the *demos* only inasmuch as the *demos* has extorted it (as it has no title and can obtain freedom only through sheer force), they become a part of the societal whole by litigation. The *demos* is wrongfully in its place and enters into this place through litigation; little wonder that Aristotle finds himself unable to determine how it would participate in power:

> there is still a danger in allowing them to share the great offices of state, for their folly will lead them into error, and their dishonesty into crime. But there is a danger also in not letting them share, for a state in which many poor men are excluded from office will necessarily be full of enemies.[18]

For Rancière, "what [the *demos*] brings to the community strictly speaking is contention," conflict.[19] The mere presence of the "people," of the *demos*, of those who have no specific quality in a society in which each group receives a place according to their quality, is in fact like a wound inflicted at the heart of the idea that a just society is based on order, structure, and proportion. The mere presence of those who have no titles, and who even have nothing in common one with one another, breaks with the good harmony, the good "count" of the parts, which is allegedly based on each groups' merits and contributions to the whole—the "count" of virtues and merits that, were it actually real, would make it possible to sit down, discuss, calculate, and resolve any possible conflict.

Forcing their way into society (their freedom is a result of their strength faced with the other classes, who, unless they are forced to, do not perceive them as a part of the social whole, but merely as laboring bodies), their wrongful presence at the same time exposes the wrong that the good division of society imposes on them. As Rancière explains, "the mass of men without qualities identifies with the community in the name of the wrong that is constantly being done to them by those whose position or qualities have the natural effect of propelling them into inexistence."[20] If their presence is a wrong—a twist in the good order of the whole—it is because it exposes the absence of necessity supporting the alleged titles that make it possible to identify the components of a society, their contribution to the whole, and the role that they receive in relation and in proportion to it. More precisely, it makes manifest that even those who have titles, who have a rightful part in society, have it ultimately in accordance with their capacity to exert power, force, and violence against others. If this is so, it is fundamentally because it is not only the *demos*, but what it brings—freedom—that appears as a litigious object. As aforementioned, freedom is at once the supposed specificity of one class and yet something that applies equally to everyone; and secondly, although essentially defining one class, freedom seems to have no proper essence, but only to express

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[18] Aristotle, *Politics*, III, 11, 1281b25-30. Revised Oxford Translation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
[19] Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, 9.
[20] Ibid., 9.

a given, purely contingent relation of forces that simply *happens* to take place. The equal presence of freedom in every group of citizens in fact names not only the fact that the *demos* has enough force not to be reduced into slavery, but also names the freedom of the rich to make money, the power (or violence) via which they manage to make money, and that they ultimately present to society as their "specific" contribution. Freedom thus appears not as much as a positive character that the people brings with it but that ultimately everyone shares, but as an empty act—the act by which the demos liberates itself from a position of subordination, and ultimately of social inexistence, into which someone else's title to power (someone else's freedom) pushes them. Freedom is nothing but the emergence from slavery to which the wealth of the rich threatens to reduce the *demos*; but it simultaneously also seems to name the force of the rich to impose their wealth as their identifying property, thus forcing those who do not share it into the margins of inexistence.

Fundamental to the definition of politics, "freedom," qua the specificity of everyone which the *demos* makes its own, shows that the order of society ultimately rests simply on force relations. But if freedom seems hence to stand for the equivalent of sheer contingency, if it seems simply to name each group's freedom to force their presence into the social count by making their specific type of force (money, lineage, virtue, etc.) count as a defining, essential characteristic, with the *demos* an inversion takes place: what the *demos* brings to society is not its own specific freedom, not freedom bound to a specific characteristic (as in the freedom of the rich to make money); instead, the *demos* brings *freedom as such* as its "own," and at the same time it brings it forth as a logical absurdity within the logic of a society divided into classes on the supposed basis of exclusive, identifying properties. It brings forth as its own a freedom that is devoid of all character, a freedom that everyone has equally. Freedom appears here, then, as the other side of equality, as its logical correlate: it shows that a society conceived as a set of groups that are ordered into a whole, each one of which is identified by its unequal, exclusive character, is inconsistent with the presence of a *demos* without qualities (although being simultaneously unable to exclude it); hence, freedom appears as the equal presence in every group of a radical contingency, a freedom that thus flattens out the apparently natural identification of exclusive, unequal properties. Freedom and equality are therefore interwoven in their exposing the void of essence upon which society rests: if, on the one hand, freedom is equally present in each group as the force by which they extort the recognition of their unequal position and of their power within society, on the other hand, the mutual relation of freedom and equality (the very same presence of freedom in everyone as the force to establish oneself in an unequal position of domination) suggests a different possible way of forming community, on in which freedom does not count as the mere source of its logical opposite—domination.

Based on precisely these considerations, Rancière highlights how politics necessarily starts from the conflictual indetermination of freedom which is the paradoxical *proper*, or specific character of the *demos*. The people who are part of society while having no title to offer are the same that, in the beginning, we saw demanded to be taken into consideration as a political protagonist, and not simply as a brute, animal workforce. The conflictual nature that its presence carries inevitably reappears whenever the people is manifest on the political scene: on the one hand, thanks to its freedom, the people is recognized as a part of society, while on the other, because of the indetermination and universality of "its" freedom, it is believed to hold no title that would make it rightfully take part in the political arena, and no quality that would make it be able to articulate a discourse in it. Whenever the people demands to be listened to as a part of the political scene, the state and the wealthy will inevitably only hear screaming bodies demanding more comfort, time, and money. Its fight for recognition is an endless one because, from the standpoint of the good division of society into parts, it simply makes no sense. It is not just; it is wrong. And it is not, Rancière points out, "an exchange—

even a violent one—between established partners,"[21] but rather a scene of conflict in which a part which is not (a part which is nothing, but stands for the whole) demands to be listened to as if it was something. Which is strictly impossible without the whole structure of society falling apart.

This peculiar mode of presence of the people as conflictual part twisting the very fundament supporting the logic of community brings us back to our initial point: it is in those conflicts in which the nature of conflict itself is part of the conflict that something fundamental, something worthy of thought resides. The question of the proper place and role in society of those who have no specific title, the question of the place of those who have nothing in common but to be excluded from any specific title, is unsolvable within the good order of society itself. Their presence brings nothing to society. Upon a closer look, however, we can actually say that *what they bring is precisely just such a nothing*: they expose the nothing, the void of necessity, and the ultimate lack of sense upon which the idea relies that society is a whole divided into groups according to their specific properties. They expose how the order of society that excludes them, or accepts them if forced to, has nothing natural about it, but is based on violence and imposition, on an absence of reason and a merely contingent relation of force: the force of each individual to be able to conquer a place with which they retroactively identify *as if* it was their "natural" place. The presence of the *demos* exposes precisely such a nothing—a void of necessity. The *demos* is a nothing (i.e., is without a proper essence) that exposes a nothing; its paradoxical presence does not solve the conflict of interpretation around its role (who are these "people"? what do they contribute to the common good?), but shifts it to another level. It produces an *Aufhebung*, an uplifting of the conflict: being at once a nothing in quest of a place and a part that has an empty character in common with all the other parts (freedom), the *demos* ultimately displaces the conflict, which its empty essence produces, onto the societal order itself. Its presence introduces "a fundamental torsion that blocks the (allegedly) natural logic of "properties","[22] showing that this logic is based on nothing other than violence and imposition, on nothing other than an absence of reason and a contingent relation of forces. The irresolvable conflict around the *demos'* empty, paradoxical nature is transposed onto the level of another nothing, namely the sheer contingency of the societal order in whose frame conflicts are usually explained and solved. The societal order is shown not to be the end point at which conflicts find their resolution but a conflictual term in itself. It is shown to be a set of merely contingent, and often violent, relations of power, stabilized in a form that presents itself ideologically as a harmonious order. Being a void of essence that exposes the void of reason upon which its paradoxical place is determined, the *demos* becomes political when it acts as a conflictual term able to reactivate the conflict whose violent stabilization resides at the origin of the harmonious societal order. Its presence makes transparent the fact that if there are inter-communitarian conflicts, it is because there are communities (the rich and the nobility, as well as national or religious communities, which work through identification and exclusion)—that there are communities whose fundamental essence is nothing, nothing but their having taken a certain role and having acquired a certain wealth, at a certain place and at a certain moment.

V. The Empty Essence of Community

Thanks to such considerations, the societal order is thus revealed as being not the common terrain upon which conflicts are resolved, but instead a conflictual term in itself qua structural

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[21] Ibid., 27.
[22] Ibid., 13. Translation modified.

stabilization of a conflictual, and often violent, relation of forces. Yet, something really common is also revealed, namely that the *demos's* absence of a proper character, of the "nothing in common" that those who belong to the *demos* have, is also the common ground upon which all classes and groups are founded. The common trait of the members of a group is in fact each time nothing essential, it is the merely factual chance of having had the freedom, or the space of liberty, to impose a certain relation of forces upon on others, and then retrospectively present it as a natural trait defining the group. What the *demos* brings with its absence of proper character is therefore a "nothing" that is ultimately common to everyone. But from this a particular mode of action of the *demos* ensues. First, as aforementioned, the demos *effectively brings nothing to society*, and does so in the form of a conflict: it directly exposes the void of reason upon which the apparently natural division of society in communities or classes relies (freedom is presented directly as the proper of the *demos*, while in other groups freedom is the hidden ground upon which a proper characteristic—for instance, wealth—is constituted and presented as natural property of the said group). Secondly, the *demos* simultaneously presents itself as *the community of those who have nothing in common* (no title, no specific property), save for the capacity to wound society, by inscribing such a nothing in the allegedly natural density of the social order. The *demos*, openly identifying itself with the lack of property that ultimately is proper to anyone, brings itself into the common sphere as a nothing, thus conflictually exposing the very void of reason upon which social groups and social divisions rely.

In this sense one can think of the community of such nothing as the very starting point from which the violence of the exclusive partitions and classifications upon which communities are defined is undone. If the violence arising from a conflict is nothing but a manifestation of the very violence of the exclusiveness whereby communities are defined, then only the idea of a totally empty community, a community of those who have nothing in common, can actively expose and give form to a conflict, the aim of which is to cut through the communitarian, identitarian violence, to expose the pure void of reason upon which it relies, and, ultimately, to organize its destruction. Against the common thought that, to quote Rancière, "in the social order, there can be no vacuum. There is only ever the full, weights and counterweights" between the different parts, the idea arises that "the pure empty quality of equality between anyone and everyone"[23] (each being equally void of any title to occupy a given place in society) "produces a void," in the sense of a fracture in the alleged evidence that a given social order is something just, necessary, and even natural.

Various authors have stressed how such a "community of those who have nothing in common" has a proper political capacity: the capacity to create conflictual moments by forcing a point into a societal order that is inconsistent with this order—a point that thus appears in it as a void, as nothing. To take the example given above: when those who are just laboring bodies in need of rest within the good order of society start to read and comment upon state laws and economic treaties, it appears as a sheer nonsense. Their actions are perceived as inconsistent; and yet such senseless acts introduce a far deeper conflict than would simple demands by workers for more money or better conditions. The singular force of such actions is that they mark a refusal of the apparent natural difference between those who know and those who do not. Maurice Blanchot defines such actions, which are impossible to place within the logic of the situation in which they appear, as "singular

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[23] Ibid., 35.

experiences"; and, he adds, "singular experiences" are those "of a man impassioned by indifference in a desperate refusal of differences and particularities."[24] Such indifference, therefore, "far from being idle inactivity" is "a threat and a scandal for thought"[25]: it creates a zone subtracted from the logic that names, organizes, and hierarchizes the parts of a situation, and hence it limits the validity of this logic while exposing the violence and lack of reason upon which it relies. What is at issue in posing a void, a point of non-sense that renders given differences invalid, is ultimately the active construction of a radical difference.

Crucially, this quote shows how "indifference" is coupled with its apparent opposite: "singular experience." As paradoxical as it might seem, what is really singular is not that which is extremely determined, but that which produces an indetermination. "Singular" in fact does not mean "very specifically determined" (like a person determined by class, gender, nationality, wealth, religion, etc.), but instead that which exceeds specific determinations altogether. That which exceeds determinations is identified—and herein lies its peculiarity— with what is absolutely subtracted from them, not passively but actively. Giorgio Agamben echoes this thought by pointing out how singularity "is not a final determination of being, but a withering away or an indetermination: a paradoxical individuation by indetermination."[26] A singularity, in other words, is not the simplest element upon which the organization of a given situation relies; it is hence not an individual element, an individuality, although it still performs an active individuation, the active constitution of something new. More precisely, a singularity is what builds difference through indifferentiation: by positing itself as something new and irreducible to the logic of the situation in which it appears, it invalidates the capacity of this logic to identify individuals according to a defined, finite set of positive features. Workers, who, in a conflict around wages and working conditions, start reading and commenting on laws, cannot be recognized as logically belonging to the situation. Their actions appear, it might be said, as acts of indetermination that aim to create what can be called a "neutral position," that is, a position subtracted from the logic according to which an individual is identified by its specific belonging to a class or set, and where a set is identified by a certain exclusive characteristic that every other set belonging to the situation lacks. They are workers, but they read, and by doing so not only do they display the inconsistency of the logic according to which culture belongs to those who have enough free time and wealth to acquire it, but they also displace the battle, as said, from the private terrain of contractual confrontation with an employer to the public sphere of law-making. Any such a singular *neutrum* in a conflict situation is thus not an inactive term, but a term that subtracts itself from the very logic upon which the opponents come to oppose each other, and thus enters into direct conflict with the very self-evidence of the conflict's logic. What is thereby revealed is how the logic of conflict always hides a more fundamental conflict, a conflict that hides the precise conflictual nature of the relation between those who are in power and those who are not.

A further characteristic of singularity qua subtraction from common, specific, and oppositional determinations is that it can by definition be universally predicated of any individual, independently of their positive determinations. That means that we are equal not inasmuch as we belong, together with others, to a certain group that identifies us, but through our singularity, i.e. through our capacity to exceed the determinations that identify us. In other

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[24] Maurice Blanchot, *"The Terror of Identification,"* 208.
[25] Maurice Blanchot, "Traces," in *Friendship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 221.
[26] Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 55.

words, equality is nothing but the capacity, commonly shared by everyone, to expose the very nothing, the very absence of sense of the partitions that structure our common world, and that determine the position and role of our individual identities. The explosive consequence being that what we have in common, to paraphrase Agamben, is not "that which unites us in essence, but is that which scatters us in existence."[27] That which tears us apart, together.

The "nothing in common" that unites the *demos* as its proper characteristic thus names the universal capacity to actively subtract oneself from oppositional, specific determinations, i.e. from inequality. Relying on a formal universal predictability, the logic of conflictual singularity can be endlessly expanded by bringing together more and more singular "subtractive" points. Agamben thus stresses the political consequence of the sharing of the absence of a common: describing a series of recent and much-discussed people's protests, characterized by an "almost total absence of concrete, determinate demands" he observes: "when people with no common identity" rise with no specific requests, this has an explosive effect. In any given conflict, "the state can recognize any claim for identity […]. What the state cannot tolerate in any way, however, is that singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging"[28]: when this happens—when people come together and ask for recognition, without having an identity for which they would ask for recognition; when they ask for recognition while having nothing in common—the usual outcome is violent repression.

Inadmissible by the state, a community of singularities can on the contrary constitute the model of a political community. In *The Inoperative Community* Jean-Luc Nancy stresses the necessity to separate the idea of community from the logic of the individual—the logic upon which individuals are recognized and classified. Community, he claims, should not be thought as the mediation or gathering of individuals that we ultimately recognize because they are defined by exclusive characteristics enabling them to be organizing into groups. Thus community has to be thought of as singular in a twofold sense: first, the components of the community are all singular for having nothing in common but the void of sense of being in the same place at the same time (community is not our origin or our goal or our common ground, community is simply, Nancy stresses, "what happens to us"[29]); second, what "makes a community" is the always singular actions by which they collectively organize their capacities to undo the exclusive categorizations that identify them as individuals.

Starting from such considerations, the idea appears of an ultimately empty community, and even more of an actively emptying community. For Nancy, "a community is not a project of fusion,"[30] but instead an explosive project: its common is "resistance to fusion […] and this resistance is the fact of being-in-common,"[31] is what is put in common in the community. Nancy goes even further, writing that, "having nothing in common" is the only universal common, and hence any project of foundation of the community on a solid, positive ground is not only a project of exclusion of those who do not have this or that title, this or that characteristic allegedly allowing them to be part of it, but is the very death or logical

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[27] Ibid., 18. The question here is how, in Spinoza, "the communication of singularities in the attribute of extension does not unite them in essence but scatters them in existence": the underlying theme is here nonetheless the logic of individuation as caught between the singular and the common.

[28] Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 85.

[29] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 11.

[30] Ibid., 15.

[31] Ibid., 20.

impossibility of "community." For Nancy, ultimately, "community occupies a singular place: it assumes the impossibility of its own immanence" and of identity with itself—it assumes "the impossibility of a communitarian being."[32] Furthermore, if "having nothing in common" is the only possible common, this is because any project to found a community on identity (nationality, religion, class, race, wealth, culture) is ultimately nothing but a death drive: as he boldly puts it, "collective enterprises dominated by a will of immanence," of identification with an exclusive property, "have as their truth the truth of death," have as their ultimate truth a death wish. "Communal fusion," he continues, "contains no other logic than that of the suicide of the community that is governed by it."[33] Not only are the criteria of absolute identity built on exclusion by definition, but once the exclusion of the others is complete, this will inevitably continue by a constant purge of all those who do not comply with the ideality of certain abstract criteria of identification: in capitalism, the rich will continue to expel more and more people from the circle of the wealthy (and today, in fact, we bear witness to the way that capitalism's promise to make everyone richer is turning into a constantly shrinking number of the super-wealthy, while everyone else slides into poverty—a socially and economically unsustainable process that would ultimately make collapse the very foundation upon which the wealth of the wealthiest few is based). This occurs in a way that is not dissimilar, Nancy suggests, to Nazism, which would have ended up by killing each and every German, as no one actually could sufficiently match the criterion of Aryanness, the only logic of which was the infinite war waged against "the other." This viewpoint is far removed from the idea that violence, domination, and conflicts can be solved by finding some positive common ground, that they can be solved, or at the least understood, in terms of identity. The project of building the community around a common identity ultimately comes down to one of death and destruction, and the idea of finding something in common with which the opponents in a conflict could identify does no more than displace the conflict onto something else while maintaining the structural inequality and violence in which it is rooted.

The only possible community is therefore what one can call, on the contrary, a "conflictual community," a community that constantly acts, expands, and builds itself by tearing apart the very fabric of the identitarian partitions upon which current communities are built. At the foundation of such a community of those who have nothing in common, save for the common capacity to undo the logic of the identitarian common, is the idea of a paradoxical mutual resemblance. "One resembles me in that I myself resemble him: we resemble together, if you will. That is to say there is no original or origin of the identity. What holds the place of the origin," and keeps us together, apart from any origin "is the sharing of singularities,"[34] is our common reciprocal singularity or dissemblance. What defines an individual as being an individual is not the fact of being the element of a set. It is not their belonging to a class, their being the bearer of an exclusive character, or their being, in Platonic terms, the copy of a model. What makes an individual 'one' is their singularity, that is, their capacity to identify with the alteration by which they make evident their distance from the model, and by which they ultimately expose the model itself as a contingent construction allowing for separation and domination. This singularity, this identification with nothing, with nothing but an act of alteration, is what everyone has in common with each other: what I have in common with the other is, in other words, not only that I am the other of the other, but also that I am constantly different from myself, capable of "altering" or "othering" myself.

Any positive common characteristic is, qua determinate, always exclusive, while the

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[32] Ibid., 15.
[33] Ibid., 12.
[34] Ibid., 33.

capacity to subtract oneself from determinations can by definition be predicated of any individual. We are equal not inasmuch as we belong to a certain group that identifies us, but insofar as we are singular, i.e., insofar as we can exceed and invalidate the determinations that identify us. Universally shared qua singular subtraction to identification, equality is the short-circuit of the singular (that which is singularly subtracted from the logic of specific identity) and of the universal. Equality is thus not a substantive property, but rather an act, the reality of which is measured by its effectiveness in undermining the logic that determines the distribution of exclusive identities: universally predicable and realized by its effectiveness, equality is thus such inasmuch as it organizes singular, always absolutely new (as they rely on no pre-given social logic) and simultaneously communal actions, via which more and more parts of a situation are subtracted from the logic that in the latter presides over the unequal identification of its members.

Thought in these terms, equality almost perfectly matches what we have previously seen are the attributes of freedom. Freedom is nothing but everyone's equal capacity to be singular, i.e., to introduce a wrong into the good count of the parts. It means having enough force to bring forth the conflictual substratum upon which the alleged harmony of the social balance relies. Freedom and equality are both incalculable, as they are not the result of the resolution of conflicts, but rather identify with the strength of a conflictual, collective facticity: being fundamentally empty, freedom and equality have no essential determining property, since they determine themselves as an emptying activity, as the collective activity that voids the common of any positive property. Freedom and equality are hence the two absolutely empty characters that identify the empty community, the community of those who have nothing in common. This means that such a community is therefore identified with a subtractive activity; this activity, it might be observed, fundamentally consists in breaking the identification of freedom with inequality, the identification of freedom with an unequal property specific to each group: the freedom of the rich to make money, of a group to dominate a certain country, and so on. Freedom identifies with equality inasmuch as it is an always singular act, one via which a collective—not endowed with any unifying character—breaks with the unequal partition of society that rests on one groups' freedom to exert power over others.

VI. The Expropriative Character of the Empty Community is what Defines it as Essentially Conflictual

Indifferent to any given positive qualification that would organize its specificity, its parts, and its place in the world, such a community of those who have nothing in common is always singular, and it constitutes its unique body and shape subtractively, i.e. by a series of actions that undermine the capacity of the situation to determine the identity of its components according to their positive properties. Setting out from this perspective, Roberto Esposito suggests that the community of those who have nothing in common is characterized by a mode of action which is not only subtractive, but more precisely ex-propriative. Esposito notes how several different models of community are united by the idea that what gives a community its identity is a certain "proper," that is, literally, a "property" of its subjects. More specifically, after listing a series of politico-philosophical models that identify community with a given property (either in the sense of a belonging, such as to a land, or in the sense of a definitory common trait, such as a language, a nationality, or a cultural heritage), he remarks how "these conceptions are united by the unreflected assumption that community is a "property" belonging to its subjects, something that they have in common" and that defines them: "an attribute, a determination, a predicate that qualifies them as belonging to the same

set"[35]: but, argues Esposito, far from defining a "common," this rather defines what is private, an exclusive possession (land, wealth, religion, language, a common "civilization") of which others are deprived; something common only in the form of conflicts for possession.[36]

Community, he points out via the Latin etymology of the term, is based rather on the idea of a shared (*cum*) gift (*munus*), where "gift" has to be understood as something that we give away without anything in return: "common is what is not proper or own, it starts where the own or proper ends."[37] Hence, the opposite of "any idea of property collectively owned by a group of individuals—or even from their belonging to a common identity, [...] what the members of the community share is expropriation."[38] More radically and precisely, the *munus* that we give away in the community is not something we own and which we renounce in the name of the common good (we are not expropriated of our individual or collective self in the name of a superior good or for the need of a larger commonality). What we give away—the *munus* of which we expropriate ourselves—is the very idea of a common characteristic that defines us as individuals belonging to a community. "Community" names a shared activity of expropriation, a collective removal of such properties (such as being Chinese or Italian, rich or poor, Muslim or Protestant) that apparently define us as individuals belonging to an alleged "community" that is one only by excluding those who do not share such attributes. To this extent, community is, first, the community of a certain nothing, the community of the void of reason upon which any given "proper" community is formed. But, secondly, it is a shared set of organized actions that always take local, new forms: the collective actions taken by those who affirm that they have nothing in common but their capacity to insert a conflictual fracture inside the common order that provides an unequal place for each of them. Through such actions, the common is always singular and thus never the same twice over: the community consists of (the proper consistency of the community is nothing but) the stratification of the always new, always contingent acts that aim at the expropriation of the "proper" common—an expropriation without which the community is impossible.

The body of such an expropriative community is at once solid and contingent: it is built by a set of actions, and by all the means of organization and structure required to remove the evidence of what is supposedly proper to the common. This has at least three relevant aspects. First, that expropriation simultaneously affects the "proper" of the common and that of the individual. The individual is meant no longer as a representative of a given group whose identifying characteristics this individual bears, but as a singular force of dis-identification, as an absolutely singular point of alteration from specific identity. Secondly, it implies a certain opacity. What is common to a group is not a self-evident property of which the individual would be the bearer or the representative, but exactly a set of acts that confound this self-evidence. Each individual is identified qua singularly one and qua belonging to the community by subtractive actions, thanks to which the individual conflicts with the possibility of

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[35] Roberto Esposito, *Communitas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 2 (translation modified).

[36] One might note how this resonates with Rancière's idea that the proper that each one brings to the community, rather than an original possession, is the result of an act of appropriation, the logical companion of which is an act of exclusion whose ultimate form is, following Nancy, a death drive. Property is theft, but also what makes the proper of a community is theft: the proper of each identity is the result of an act of violence perpetrated on others an ultimately on oneself.

[37] Roberto Esposito, *Communitas*, 3 (translation modified).

[38] Roberto Esposito, "Community and Nihilism," in *The Italian Difference,* ed. Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano (Melbourne: Re.Press, 2009), 40.

determining their identity as a representative of a certain class, as the bearer of a certain property. Community is built on such actions of resistance to the transparency of representation. Thirdly, such organized opacity is above all an attempt to invalidate the logic of the state: the state is in fact the structured form of a logic of representation, which counts individuals as representatives of a group identified by an exclusive property. That the empty community, the community of those who have no other title but the empty equality that they have in common, is constituted around the expropriation of the criteria of identification upon which individuals are unequally represented, necessarily means that its main effect is a "withering away of the state," which is to say, a progressive invalidation of the very logic upon which the state is built. In this sense the expropriative project is a communist one, inasmuch as communism is thought, consistently with the perspective of Marx's *German Ideology*, as an organized and structured withering away of the state of fact of the present, and of the State as the representational structure allowing the indefinite reproduction of the latter.[39]

All this determines how community, to cite Esposito, is "never a place of arrival, but a place of departure." It is not in the imagined harmony of the local community, of the nation, or of the world's humanity that we will find justice and an end to conflicts, but only in the common, conflictual capacity to drift away from their poisonous, divisive order. I conclude with an example provided by one of my most beloved contemporary directors, Jia Zhang-Ke. Jia was asked by the municipality of Shanghai to devote a celebratory film to the glory of the new metropolis of progress, of the new open-armed city, the common place in which each individual and each group may harmoniously find their place. What he settled on doing was something quite different: namely, to narrate the story of this city by telling the stories of people who, in different times and for different reasons, had to leave it. Rather than depict a common identity of the city, these stories present divergent movements, each of which inflicts a polemical fracture in the rhetoric of the modern city as a community of progress, wealth, and prosperity, instead revealing it as a tale of violence and exclusion. Yet, these stories do make a community, and they do sing the glory and beauty of the city: together, qua narrative unity of the film, they expose how any logic of common identity is ultimately what tears us apart, and how what we have in common is, literally, our divergent trajectories, the collective form of our capacity to constantly diverge from the place to which we allegedly belong.

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[39] See, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works, Volume 5 (1845-1847)*, (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 49.

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