

Equality and Democracy

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Thinking about public space and language, an indissoluble link seems to connect them if we agree to look at them from the viewpoint of democracy. Hannah Arendt tells us that modern revolutions are, after Christianity's depreciation of antiquity, a way of reconnecting with the ancient Greeks, for whom political equality is equality in participation and ability to live together without divisions between ruled and rulers. But what is new is that the public domain is no longer reserved for a minority protected from the necessities of life. Following Arendt, Martine Leibovici (2000) asks: 'What is political freedom?': it is the right to a say in the public world and the right for all to be seen there, to speak and be heard, and especially for 'the multitude of the poor and humiliated, hidden in the night of shame' (Arendt, 1967). Earlier, Claude Lefort had commented on these texts, pointing out that the fact that Hannah Arendt sees politics in the light of a reversal of the totalitarian image, which made her concentrate on moments when its most hidden challenges are revealed: the Greek city in antiquity and the American and French revolutions (and perhaps the workers' councils in Russia in 1917 and Hungary in 1956 as well).

In the case of Greece, the purest case, we see, according to Arendt, a 'space' being created, a space emerging where, at a distance from their private business appropriate to the area of the *oikos* – the domestic production unit where constraints of division of labour and relations between dominant and dominated reign – men recognize each other as equals, discuss and decide together. In that space they can be rivals and try, as Hannah Arendt says, by 'fine words' and 'noble deeds', to impress their image on the public memory. (Lefort, 1986: 66)

The relationship that governs political life is an exchange of words in a world that is shared – and therefore human – and is not *one* but open to plurality. We are aware that this opposition between unity and plurality enters into a series of oppositions: public/private, politics/social life, power/violence, contemplative/active life, and that the last of these is at the root of Hannah Arendt's refusal to call herself a

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‘philosopher’: for from Plato to Marx the freedom that was at the heart of political action in the democratic city was taken over by philosophy, and the visible political space was invalidated as prosaic in favour of the invisible thought that was separate from the world. Philosophy, from Plato to Marx, dreamed of restoring political activity only by wishing to make philosophy *reality*, and to project into history and experience the idea of a logic and truth that are separate from action and proceed from a disregard for action and thus the demise of politics.

I should like to start from that point and interrogate the agonistic field of political philosophy in France, of which the issues are centrally crystallized, explicitly or implicitly, in that reference to Hannah Arendt and her refusal of the label ‘philosopher’.

I

First of all, there are old articles and above all Miguel Abensour’s recent book (2006). In it he quotes Hannah Arendt’s 1964 television interview with Günther Grass, in which she replies as follows to the question as to where she sees the difference between political philosophy and her work as a teacher of political theory:

The difference lies in the thing itself. The phrase ‘political philosophy’, which I avoid, is already extraordinarily charged with tradition. When I approach these problems, whether in the university or elsewhere, I always take care to mention the tension that exists between philosophy and politics, in other words between humans as philosophers and humans as beings of action; this tension does not exist in natural philosophy [. . .]. But they [philosophers] do not stand in a neutral relation to politics: since Plato this has not been possible [. . .]. And that is why most philosophers feel a kind of hostility towards all politics, with very few exceptions, Kant among them. A hostility that is extremely important in this context because it is not a personal issue: it is in the very essence of the thing, that is, in the political issue as such that the hostility lies [. . .]. I do not want in any way to be part of that hostility [. . .]. I want to look at politics, so to speak, with eyes purified of all philosophy. (Arendt, 1980, quoted in Abensour, 2006: 19; cf. Tassin, 2001: 15)

This means 1) that for Hannah Arendt there is no homogeneity between philosophy and politics, which in her view are radically distinct in essence. The phrase ‘political philosophy’ is therefore deceptive in that it masks a tension, an antagonism even, between these two forms of life, contemplative and active; 2) that it is the responsibility of philosophers, as they have been constituted in a corporation since Plato, to distribute hierarchically contemplative life above and active life below, and this hostility, this withdrawal of philosophers with regard to things of the city, does not happen by chance but has to do with the thing itself; 3) that in consequence Hannah Arendt can only refuse any identification with the figure of the political philosopher in order to preserve the purity of the view she takes of political matters, and to claim that she is merely a theoretician of politics without the spectacles of philosophy. And in this *maximal, even emphatic* reading, which he suggests for this text and some others in order to take them seriously, Miguel Abensour poses the question as to the complexity of Arendt’s position – its evolution from being close to a critique of the

sociology of knowledge to a militant anti-Platonism – and as to the meaning of the thinking space opened up by the distance from philosophy she wishes to mark out. Can we turn Hannah Arendt into a philosopher despite herself, and use her as an authority in order to make a claim for a different political philosophy from the traditional one?

Miguel Abensour is working hard to extend and understand Hannah Arendt's stance of hostility to political philosophy. And first he relates how his reading has evolved over 30 years. When functionalism and Marxism ruled, Hannah Arendt seemed like a centre of resistance to the sociologization or scientization of politics and could thus embody tradition alongside Leo Strauss, by eliminating the difference reduced to political choices between the woman who had devoted a book to revolution and the man who did not talk about it, while she took the citizen's side when Leo Strauss was resolutely on the philosopher's.

Thirty years later the context has changed; it has become a situation of voluntarist, determined restoration of political philosophy as an academic discipline supported by strategies of institutional recognition: associations, journals, book series, dictionaries, conferences. Tradition no longer lies in inventing the new but in repeating the same, while political matters are back after the end of totalitarian regimes which themselves claimed to be getting rid of politics. The return of politics does not require a restoration of a political philosophy that has been the same since Plato, but rather another approach that will allow us to rediscover politics, a philosophy that does not – according to a distinction of Feuerbach's that Miguel Abensour often likes to quote – feed off itself as an academic discipline, but is the expression of a human need. On the one hand, those bringing back political philosophy want to reclaim Hannah Arendt in order to turn her into a great figure of political philosophy. In opposition to this, Hannah Arendt is interpreted by Abensour as a figure of resistance: resistance to the longstanding sociologization of politics and resistance to the restoration of political philosophy insofar as its aim is to cover over political issues. This is a problem that makes Arendt's reversal of Platonism one of the keys to understanding her critique of the idea of political philosophy and its agenda: rejection of the myth of the cave into which the philosopher descends to communicate the truth to those who stayed there and gains from making applicable – providing they are *transformed* and the Idea of the Beautiful is replaced by that of the Good – the Ideas he found outside the cave, thus legitimizing his position as philosopher-king. Hence it emerges finally that making replaces acting, the work of art replaces action. Politics emerges reduced to zero, since it is no longer a matter of letting the political bond occur in the inventiveness of free human beings' praxis, but of eliminating chaos by imposing an order from the transcendence of the heaven of ideas which would arrive to authorize the correct administration of the city. Political philosophy is not worth an hour of trouble if it is about subjecting freedom and its exercise to the authority of a group of Ideas experts. But Arendt's watchword according to Abensour, 'overturn Platonism', is only half an invitation.

Standing up to the tradition of Plato and Aristotle does not mean replacing it by a more or less positivist theory of politics. Instead, for Arendt it would mean going beyond psychologism, sociologism and philosophism with 'a kind of phenomenology' concerned with getting back to political matters themselves. Abensour

devotes a whole chapter to commenting on Kant's exception; that is, the fact that Kant is one of the few philosophers not to have felt hostility towards all politics, according to Arendt: 1) Kant chooses equality when the tradition of political philosophy feeds on the division between wise and stupid, rehabilitating common sense, which is now unconnected with the vulgar herd. Thus the philosopher can no longer adopt that superior tone which defines the thinker as someone above the ordinary crowd, for whom philosophy as an ornament of understanding was the revelation of a mystery inexpressible in a common tongue and incommunicable via language; 2) Kant stresses human plurality as a thinker about the world: that is, a space shared by humans in the plural and therefore concerned with politics. But it is also necessary to be attentive to the division between actors in and spectators of the world. Only the latter have access to the meaning of history, and Arendt credits Kant with the distinction between thinking and judging, the faculty of judging becoming the supreme political faculty, which opens the way to another political philosophy – one that has been discussed at length by Jean-François Lyotard (1986), Françoise Proust (1991), Amparo Vega (2000) and Étienne Tassin (1987), and which is perhaps the site of Badiou's radical 'difference', with all Arendt's legacy in political philosophy; 3) the *sensus communis* is a way of breaking with the myth of the cave and Plato 'father of our era's political philosophy', a cave where humans are in chains, deprived of freedom and language and therefore apolitical, whereas in Kant there is an audience of spectators who exist in the plural, all of whose actions are governed by the public sphere. And so politics is no longer, as it is in Plato, the imposition of a normative order coming from the elsewhere of the heaven of Ideas and imported by a caste of Ideas experts for an unruly multitude. It has become, in the transfer of the hypothesis of *sensus communis* from aesthetics to politics, the manifestation of a pre-existing principle which it is based on and which makes it possible, like the unfolding of shared being within a given historical community (Abensour, 2006: 221–3). If, in the aesthetic domain, one can put oneself into another's shoes and discuss his tastes, and even share them, then in the political domain, if a matter is negotiable, thinking from another's position is possible and allows an impartial judgement to be formulated that can lead to an agreement between the parties, which keeps violence at bay.

We know Hannah Arendt did not develop that legacy from Kant any further, but on that basis Abensour can credit her with opening the door to the critical political philosophy he hopes for, even though she remains on the threshold:

A political philosophy that is no longer enslaved to the cave myth and its problem of non-communication, but attached to a pre-existing principle of *sensus communis*, to the idea, via the judgement of taste, of a universal communicability as the basis of human experience, which makes possible the institution of freedom in the historico-political.

It is Arendt who makes possible the question of an intelligibility of political matters that is not turned into government of the multitude by philosophers.

With Miguel Abensour there is a principle of interpretation which means always taking texts literally and making them work on themselves in the present, in order to go further still by establishing a 'milieu' (Merleau-Ponty) between their authors and us, where what belongs to them becomes indiscernible to us (1991: 573) in order

to make a work of art (a reciprocal interrogation) rather than a summary. This is what Horacio González (2005: 29) has called the process of liberating texts. If politics in Arendt is necessarily a space where people, freed from constraint and material needs, act in common, and democracy – a place where speech is exchanged – is the realization of politics (Hurtado-Beca, 2005: 238), if it is questioning, indeterminacy, continual reworking, as with Claude Lefort, against any liberal reduction of democracy or any objectivization of politics in the state, then Miguel Abensour (2004a, 2004b) sees it as an ‘insurgent’ democracy, a site of renewed creation of the political community of the ‘all ones’ – therefore a non-place, or a place outside. If political philosophy is suspected by Hannah Arendt of concealing the phenomenality of the *bios politikos*, Abensour harks back, as if in echo, not so much to La Boétie as to Pascal: true political philosophy does not care a fig about political philosophy.

For Miguel Abensour, democracy cannot be given once and for all as a constitution or an institution. It is action and will. Freedom is not in the nostalgia of its ephemeral inscription in the body politic, which is only a product of history, but in investment of a political will in critique of the commodification of all institutions. Consequently, this first figure of modernity no longer commits us, as with Leo Strauss, to a return to the political philosophy of the ancients, but opens us up to a critical or critical-utopian political philosophy: that is, a political philosophy likely to contribute to emancipation today. This assumes that we distinguish between a banal return to what is perceived as an academic discipline – which risks turning into a history of political philosophy, and thus, Abensour says, covering over the political issues of the present time in favour of managing the established order – and a return of ‘political matters’. And therefore, keeping a distance from the critical, catastrophe-oriented theory of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse), which sees politics and domination as inseparable, as well as the irenism of the political philosophy that wipes away traces of domination and sees the political space as a pure interplay of exchanges between equal participants, what is foreshadowed by what we might call Miguel Abensour’s Machiavellian moment would be a political philosophy that could think together the political principle and critique of domination, taking account of the fact, following La Boétie, that any manifestation of the political principle, whether democracy or republic, may degenerate into an authoritarian state. Then the political arena would be the scene of a merciless struggle between the fact of domination and the political institution, for degeneration of the institution is always possible. Following on from this, the association of utopia and the political principle would be the best defence against degeneration of political forms (Abensour, 2003).

There is thus a shift for philosophy, since it cannot be the basis for politics unless it remains the legitimization for a political order placed under the figure of domination. This shift for political philosophy in Miguel Abensour’s work, insofar as it claims to become a critical-utopian political philosophy, goes together with a conception of citizenship in which the latter would no longer be made part of a constitutional or institutional body once and for all in a designated place, but would be held in a non-place or an outside in a perpetual moving around, since for Abensour democracy is action or will, that is, it is dependant on action which is that speaking out that subjectifies the citizen and opens up again the public space of

democracy; that is, it is dependant on the language of emancipation. In other words, political philosophy will therefore be critical or else will not be.

II

Demanding a political philosophy that is something other than what Hannah Arendt and Miguel Abensour label 'tradition' is a delusion, according to Alain Badiou. He calls political philosophy an entirely different thing from a link between philosophy and politics. For him, political philosophy is what considers that the intelligibility of the political, its thinkable character and its subjection to ethical norms have their origin in philosophy: 'It is a programme which, believing politics – or rather *the* political – to be an objective given, or an invariant of universal experience, proposes to deliver thinking about it in the philosophical register' (Badiou, 1998: 19; Badiou, 2001, 2002). Why has political philosophy assumed such a place in our contemporary life? According to Badiou, it has to do with the decline of revolutionary politics and the dominant conviction that there is only one rational political form: representative democracy in all its guises. Quite recently, with Sartre, we still had the idea that Marxism was the unavoidable paradigm of our time; today it is the paradigm of democracy that cannot be transcended. Quite recently we were still focused on the legacy of Marx's theory on Feuerbach, according to which it is no longer a question of interpreting the world but of transforming it; today politics is no longer the 'real' of philosophy: instead it is philosophy that defines, in ethical categories, the real of politics. Therefore, according to Badiou, we are faced with a clear choice of two paths. Either we accept this reversal and agree that representative democracy is the only possible paradigm for our time. Then political philosophy is the ideology of contemporary democratism, through which we mourn any politics of emancipation and any revolution (Badiou, 2004: 25). Or else we establish with Badiou the fact that the intelligibility of politics is to be found in the interiority of politics itself, in what it says and what it pronounces. In other words, politics thinks itself at the same time as it is thought. If there is a link between philosophy and politics, that link is subject to the condition that politics should exist. There is no general form of the link between philosophy and politics; there are only particular cases, and the first of those is always the specificity of politics.

The central point of Badiou's demonstration here is again the reference to Hannah Arendt, but a Hannah Arendt who here, at some distance from the figure described by Miguel Abensour, is the person who reclaims academic political philosophy, from Myriam Revault d'Allonnes to Ferry and Renault: whatever Hannah Arendt's merits (and Badiou unusually credits her for her analysis of imperialism), she is held to be responsible for all the apparatus called 'political philosophy', which proliferates and adorns itself with an ethics of rights. This is an interpretation of Hannah Arendt that also comes through her use of Kant. Badiou points up, in Arendt's reading of Kant, all the indeterminacy of the word 'politics', this being neither the name of a thought (it is not a truth process) nor that of an action (it is not the construction and bringing to life of a unique new collective aiming to manage or transform what is). He notes the privilege accorded by Kant to the spectator (Kant himself being a spectator of the

French Revolution), as a consequence of which the political subject is at the spectacle of the world and politics is merely the public exercise of a judgement. Thus politics is not here the principle, maxim or prescription of a collective action aiming to transform the plural situation (or public space) itself – and so politics is relegated to the status of public opinion. Hannah Arendt and Kant – only Plato was missing. Badiou summons him too, but if anti-Platonism is being questioned it is because Badiou (1992: 220) claims allegiance to Platonism, since Plato states, in opposition to the sophists, that politics is not eternally condemned to be opinion, dissociated from truth. According to Plato, the sophist is someone who ‘is unable to see to what extent, according to the person, the nature of the good is different from that of the necessary’, which legitimates the idea that politics is management of the necessary and there is no politics of emancipation.

Arendt’s Kantism revisited by political philosophy legitimates a plurality of opinions harnessed to the state in the form of parliamentary representative democracy and plurality of political parties. It is clear that Badiou rejects Hannah Arendt’s thesis in that Arendt puts philosophical opinion at the heart of her structure: ‘the essence of politics is not plurality of opinions but the prescription of a possibility of rupture with what there is’, Badiou writes. Arendt may be credited with being a philosopher who legitimates a politics of plurality, resistance to evil and courage of judgement. But she remains a prisoner of a perspective which is that of parliamentary democracy; she accepts the rules of the game with the democratic state managing affairs, which in Badiou’s eyes contradicts any politics of emancipation and the recognition that politics is itself, in its being, a kind of thought.

Badiou takes up a stance against political philosophy and Hannah Arendt, or at least against what is made of them by the philosophers of the restoration of political philosophy, because instead of defining politics as a truth process and a prescription for the transformation of public space, this is defined as the public exercise of judgement from which the theme of truth is excluded. In Badiou’s view, philosophy does not have the relationship with politics of being the representation or capture of the ultimate ends of politics. It is not its role to evaluate, to call witnesses before a critical court, to legitimate the ultimate ends of politics. So an alternative opens up. Either democracy in philosophy’s eyes is a form of state just as tyranny, aristocracy, etc. are in Aristotle or Montesquieu. Then the question is one of good government, the good state, or refusal of democratic sovereignty as with Lenin. Or else democracy is not a philosophical category and politics is a form of thought, and it is impossible for democracy to be ordered by (or subordinate to) the state.

III

Miguel Abensour was appealing to a critical political philosophy that might extend Hannah Arendt’s gesture of rejection of a tradition of political philosophy separate from action that would come from outside and give it meaning. Alain Badiou takes up a clear and central stance against political philosophy, whatever its presupposition, because all political philosophy claims to pronounce on the ethical standard to guide action from the position of spectator (*the person who looks on, observes without*

acting, according to the Littré dictionary). But Jacques Rancière asks another question: does political philosophy exist? It is to do with the philosophy family tree, says Rancière: although there is (or has been) politics in philosophy, that is no reason why political philosophy should be a branch of the tree; it is not in Descartes, and in Plato, Socrates is in no way a philosopher who would take the politics of Athens as his subject, but an Athenian, and the only one, who 'does the things of politics' (*Gorgias*, 521d), who in reality does politics, making a radical separation between politicians' politics and philosophers' politics. 'It is not self-evident', writes Rancière (1995: 10), 'that political philosophy is a natural division of philosophy that applies its thinking, which may be critical, to politics.' Rancière also proposes a redefinition of politics. Politics is not the totality of the processes through which the coming together and consent of communities occur, nor the organization of authorities, nor the distribution of posts and functions and the systems of legitimation of that distribution. In Rancière's view, these are police functions (Pasquier, 2004). Quite the opposite, politics is what moves a body from the place it was assigned or changes the destination of a place. There is politics when police logic and egalitarian logic meet, the latter assuming the equality of speaking beings (Rancière, 1995: 99). Jacques Rancière's regulating idea involves taking into account those who are not counted in the inventory of those who are actively involved in the people, the *demos* of democracy, and who demand to be counted in together, and on an equal footing with the others; there is also politics when there is an interruption in the order, understood as natural, of the division of the perceptible between dominant and dominated, and a demand for equality. There is no basis specific to politics, and that is why political philosophy does not exist, since politics exists only in the proof that any person is equal to any other person. Hence philosophy finds itself out of place if it wishes to think the relationship between politics and philosophy and be seen as a non-place that would appear on condition of the language of emancipation. And it is here that there occurs a third reference to Plato, who in his hatred of democracy has a more accurate view of the basis of politics than serious modern advocates who tell us we should approve democracy in moderation. According to Rancière (1983), it is Plato who saw that the fact that some people are not counted in the *demos* is at the root of democracy. In a long commentary on a passage in the *Republic* (II, 369c–370c), he discovers the origin of the opposition between republic and democracy. Yves Duroux (2006) points to Rancière's use of Plato:

All contemporary French philosophers have manufactured their own Plato. Deleuze privileged the selection of rivals and the indiscernibility of simulacra. Derrida tracked down the wandering letter; Foucault discovered a first occurrence of the 'concern for self' and the courage to speak true; even Lyotard reactivated the sophists, but discreetly, and others later expanded their effect. Finally Badiou installed him on his throne again, with the absence of the One. Rancière's Plato is unusual. I will be brief, too brief. I shall just say that the first text on Plato, in 1983, is almost a pure example of what I call a dispute. He is not the Hellenists' Plato (the distinction between gentle spirits and rough spirits which ignores the corporation is speedily dismissed). Neither is he the Plato of the Plato interpreters. He is, as he says and I believe, the institution of philosophy itself, and so the 'element' of the dispute. That is why in Rancière Plato is truly interminable. I shall make just one remark: as well as Rancière's text on Plato, and as well as Plato's text too, there is a

third text which says nothing. It is the text of the Athenian *Demos*. But Rancière makes it speak and in order to do so he gives it the voice of Parisian workers. So there is the astounding production of *Phaedrus* against the Cicadas' song: while the workers are asleep having eaten their fill, the philosophers ceaselessly keep up their dialogue. 'It is shameful for a master to be woken by his servant. But Rancière's great book is called *La Nuit des prolétaires*. The dispute is about waking the sleeping master.'¹

Reference is also made (Tassin, 2003: 265ff.) to Hannah Arendt, and one of the questions might be what proximity there is between singularization in Arendt, and on the other hand subjectification in Jacques Rancière's work. But for him, far from Arendt's 'interbeing' and any thought of politics in terms of community and politics starting from an original disposition to the common or from a property, politics comes in second place and invents a form of community which institutes unprecedented relations between meanings, between meanings and bodies, between bodies and their modes of identification, places and destinations, and not first of all between subjects (Rancière, 2003: 88). Rancière's relationship with Arendt is first through the use made of her by the supporters of a return to pure politics and the end of the illusion of the social, in the conjunction of Leo Strauss's and Hannah Arendt's readings of Aristotle identifying the political order peculiar to that of 'eu-zen' (living with a view to a good) as opposed to 'zen', the order of the simple life, where we need to recognize the fundamental vicious circle that characterizes political philosophy, presupposing a mode of life peculiar to political existence (Rancière, 1998: 225). This is an interpretation he repeats two years later, saying he has abandoned Aristotle's definition of the political animal only to better attack the anthropological basis of politics in a way of life, and the idea of *bios politikos* flowering once more in the shade of Leo Strauss's and Hannah Arendt's most contemporary readers (Rancière, 2000b).

As for Kant, Rancière (2006b; cf. Rancière, 1965) replies to Yves Duroux that, though he has not developed a critical philosophy, he nevertheless has not stopped assessing the implications of criticism in both its senses: criticism as an intervention and critical philosophy as substituting the question of conditions of possibility for that of basis. Rancière situates Kant as the first moment of the three figures of the critical idea he initially noted in the young Marx's development: 1) a Kantian moment: in his article 'Debates on the Law Relating to the Theft of Dead Wood' (*Rheinische Zeitung*, October–November 1842), Marx points out that the Prussian Diet forgets the law is concerned with a universal object and is addressed to a universal human only to attend solely to the private interests of rich proprietors, and the criticism here denounces the confusion of levels between universal and particular; 2) a Feuerbacher moment: the universal human realizes he is only a particularity, an essence of the human placed by himself outside his concrete reality in the heaven of ideas, and that he needs to recuperate this; 3) a Marxist moment: identification between criticism and science, distinction between the real movement of production and history with apparent movement where people think they are the subjects of an exchange of goods and free. These three moments are, as it were, keys to the possible understanding of the issues in the interrogations of Rancière himself: 1) the Kantian moment in his work is the shift of the simple denunciation of the confusion between universal and particular on to a thinking about political intervention where

universal and particular, humanity and inhumanity, equality and inequality are entwined, which he calls the egalitarian syllogism; 2) the Feuerbachian moment takes as its target the paradigm of embodiment and presence, in both literature and politics; 3) the Marxist moment is one of radical questioning of the idea of science as what workers lack in order to free themselves from domination. So the shift of philosophy here throws up a definition of democracy: if not as a non-place, then at least as something completely different from one political regime among others, but rather like the very institution of politics, its subject and its form of relationship. In opposition to Lefort and the idea that a disembodiment of the dual body, human and divine, of the king presides over the start of democracy, with the people coming to occupy the place left empty by the king's murder (Molina, 2005), Rancière maintains that it is first of all the people that have a dual body, and that this duality is entirely in the empty supplement by which politics exists, 'as an extra to any social accounting and an exception to all logic of domination', in a logic of human being-together which 'suspends the harmony of consensus by the simple fact of actualizing the contingency of equality – neither arithmetical nor geometrical – between any speaking beings' (Rancière, 1997).

At the central point in the agonistic field from which the questions about political philosophy's present proceed – whether it is in order to replace it with a critical-utopian philosophy (Abensour), to put an end to all political philosophy (Badiou), or to deny its existence because it is the very idea of political philosophy that would have to be rejected without concession, and not only some historical manifestation or another of political philosophy (Rancière, according to Abensour) – there is the paradoxical conceptual figure of Hannah Arendt, whom each of them constructs in relation to his special relationship to Plato and Kant.

IV

From that point, how should we work on the topic of this seminar in UNESCO's 'Paths of Thought', whose title is 'The Reinvention of Democracy: Cultural Diversity and Social Cohesion'? First, we need to emphasize the paradox of its formulation – in the literal sense of the word: going against the *doxa*. If we have to reinvent democracy, is it because the existing democracies, or ones that have claimed or now claim the label, or ones that are the subject of struggles for emancipation, do not (or no longer) fit the concept of democracy, and because it is appropriate to replace them with a true democracy, to reinvent democracy in the name of democracy or against it? We would then find once again the archetype of all political philosophy as it is formulated based on a certain reading of Aristotle, the one that was constructed in the 19th century, for instance, by a Jules Barthélemy-Saint-Hilaire (1848, 1849). But the organizers complete the title of the seminar as follows: 'Cultural Diversity and Social Cohesion'. So they give a current dimension to the question posed, which requires us to think about changes in the links between cultural and political and construct, with regard to the multiple brought about by these changes, the *one* of social cohesion. A doubling of the paradox, since the requirement to reinvent democracy coming at the time of acknowledging cultural diversity – which is always

threatened with causing conflicts originating in the perception of differences in identity – must coexist with social cohesion, which in fact is denied more than ever by the violence caused by the present situation of democracy and the state of the law. One of the ways of attending to the subject of this seminar would be to interrogate the assumptions in the formulation of its topic and show, with Jacques Rancière (2000a: 54), how ‘in politics everything hangs on the description of what is designated as the situation to be analysed or the problem to be solved’. If we define the globalization scene as an increasingly strong dependence of economies on the world market and the decline of the power of national states, then the exit from the crisis of citizenship (defined no longer only as a relationship between pure individuality and a legally constituted state but also with a nation state) would lie in a choice between two modes of articulation in culture and politics. One of these modes would promote cultures as communities of belonging. Those communities (of language, history, customs, beliefs) would preserve the bond between individuals and the system, introducing mediations between an anonymous world power and individuals dispossessed of any closeness to the state and collective institutions, and of any chance whatsoever of a participation that would give them the ability to act politically as citizens. The other mode, contrary to those mediations acknowledged as being a feature of cultural communities, would be a radical separation between subjects as they act politically and their community allegiances: the sole communal link then being the one that unites individuals to the common wish for allegiance, relegating all other cultural bonds to the private sphere. On that basis, Rancière shows how this position, the reverse of the previous one, comes close to it in that it also poses the question in terms of belonging. On the one hand it is stated that to be a citizen it is necessary to belong to a limited community space, a regime of kinship, a system of shared values and beliefs; on the other hand, it is stated that there is citizenship in accordance with voluntary allegiance to a national collectivity, over and above differences of origin, sex, language or religion. In both cases it is citizenly universalism that is absent. And the second case now reduces the universal to being merely a cultural value, since it is allegiance to a national state that is the basis for citizenship. Therefore, the position that refers to ‘republican universalism’ rests just as much, according to Rancière, on a misunderstanding of political subjectification in favour of a schema of allegiance of the particular to the universal. The result is a tacit agreement to reduce political life to the logic of a consensus where subjects are recognized as economic subjects and subjects in law, possessing their rights and values, and democratic politics is reduced to its opposite: only being concerned with one’s own affairs. ‘Globalization’, writes Rancière, ‘would not be so much states’ loss of power as the logic of depolitization by states’. As for the quest for social cohesion, it is impossible to see how the philosophical paradigms of democracy in circulation could if not combat, then at least explain this.

The *judicial-state* model of the legally constituted state, from Kant to Habermas, is called into question by the growing prevalence of private interests in the era of globalization. The body charged with implementing the law – the rational state – is opposed to the irrational of violence but is reduced to being no more than a maintainer of order without preserving the balance between reason and violence that was the core of its function.

The *revolutionary* model, which justified a counter-violence to the legitimate violence of the state, assumed to serve a particular social class, is today incapable of channelling discontent by giving it a form of political expression.

The *neo-liberal* model, which believes, along with Hayek, that just rules should govern implicitly and according to a Darwinian logic, generates violence that remains without a perpetrator responsible since it is due solely to the rational logic of things and the inability of victims to adapt (Navet and Vermeren, 2004).

These three explanatory paradigms lead to three aporia and are powerless to suggest solutions to resolve social dislocation. It would be possible to point to at least four forms of violence at work in contemporary democracy. First of all, there is the generalized terror of the other, an anticipated fear of a potential danger. If this fear is related to the growing prevalence of competitive individualism on which the neo-liberal model is based, then we arrive at the paradox that it ends up triggering an appeal to a security-obsessed state instead of the trust necessary to the citizenly relationship in the democratic space (Cornu, 2007: 121ff.). The second form would be exclusion, theorized by Bertrand Ogilvie as the production of the disposable human being: it is no longer about a population of the unemployed, as Marx saw it, used as a reserve labour force to depress wages, but the production of surplus people, forever unusable and permanently excluded from the market society and its much-publicized joys. A third form of contemporary violence would be suicidal violence, all- and self-destroying, which seems to escape all forms of rationality, like the urban riots in Los Angeles in 1993. Finally, we have to take note of the recrudescence of ethnic violence with its procession of torture, rape and mutilation that go against the judicial-state model and confirm its failure to rid itself of its connection with nationalism.

So can we reinvent democracy? Jacques Rancière would say we do not live in democracies, but rather in oligarchic legally constituted states where the oligarchy's power is limited by the dual recognition of popular sovereignty and individual freedoms. For these states the economy is the only reality and the task of governments is to allow the unfettered development of the movement of wealth, to limit it and subject it to the people's interests (Rancière, 2006a). So we ought to consider that democracy is not a specific form of political regime but the mode of politics itself; it is not the form of government that allows oligarchies to rule instead of, and in the name of, the people, nor that form of society which regulates the power of goods. Rather, we should consider that it is equality, not in offering itself as an objective to achieve the community of equals, but in posing equality as a starting premise that is impossible to fix in social institutions but is always subject to the act of verifying it. Then we would have to say that *dissensus* is the basis of democratic rationality, to separate citizenship and cultural allegiance, political universal and state universal: and so democracy would remain constantly to be reinvented. That is what our three writers say in different registers: Miguel Abensour with his concept of democracy that is if not wild at least insurgent; Alain Badiou with a citizenship that would be political subjectification on condition of the event and a democracy that, as a philosophical category, would be what offers equality or forbids the circulation of predicated in contradiction with the egalitarian idea; Jacques Rancière in theorizing the political act as interrupting the order of domination, political speech as a demand to

be counted on an equal footing in the account of the uncounted of the *demos* of democracy, democracy as verification of equality.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. On Plato as the interlocutor of Badiou and Rancière, see Badiou (2006: 139).

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