Political and Impolitical: Two Perspectives to Rethink the Common and the Political in Contemporary Thought[1]

Político e Impolítico: dos perspectivas para repensar lo común y lo político en el pensamiento contemporáneo

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Abstract: This article introduces a distinction between two ways of thinking the common and the political in contemporary, post-foundational political thought which I call 'political' and 'impolitical'. Both stances share the idea that the community is both impossible and necessary. Nonetheless, while the political perspective seeks to think a new political subjectivity to produce a new commonality, the impolitical will try to think ways of desubjectification in order to avoid cooperating with any form of Power. The paper tries to show their useful insights and to point out their limits to re-think the common and politics in times of neoliberal governmentality.

Key words: community, politics, impolitical, post-marxism, subjectivity, post-foundationalism.

Resumen: Este artículo introduce una distinción entre dos modos de pensar lo común y lo político en el pensamiento político post-fundacional que llamo 'político' e 'impolítico'. Ambas posiciones comparten la idea de que la comunidad es a la vez imposible y necesaria. No obstante, mientras la perspectiva política busca pensar

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una nueva subjetividad política para producir una nueva forma de lo común, la impolítica intentará pensar modos de desubjetivación para evitar cooperar con cualquier forma de Poder. El artículo busca mostrar las apreciaciones útiles y a la vez señalar los límites de estas posiciones para repensar lo común y lo político en tiempos de gubernamentalidad neoliberal.

I. Introduction

I n this article I introduce a distinction between two ways of thinking the common and the political in contemporary, post-foundational political thought (Marchart 2007) which I call 'political' and 'impolitical' (Esposito 1999). I stage this dialogue in order to analyze how these theories can come to terms with the problems posed by a society in which our practices are captured by the *dispositifs* of control and no solid ground can be found for our being-in-common. I maintain that both stances share the view of community as simultaneously *impossible* and *necessary*. Nonetheless, while the *political* perspective seeks to re-think political subjectivities in order to *produce* a new commonality, the *impolitical* will try to think modes of desubjectification as a way to avoid cooperating with Power.

The thinkers I will deal with here have been trying to rethink the common given both the absence of any stable foundation for political action and the ultimate impossibility of a reconciled community. They share the vision that politics are indispensable as long as the negation or even foreclosure of antagonism returns in the Real of even greater violence (Mouffe 1993; 2000 & 2005) while conflict and dissent represent the core of politics (Esposito 1988; 1993). On the other hand, both stances would agree that *the political is the space of the in-common as such.* (Nancy 1993, 139) Put otherwise, the political is the expression of the common which continually actualizes and redefines it. As a result, community is not a stable, reified entity or institution. Rather, it is a conflictive dimension in which political subjects *co-ek-sist.*[2]

Bearing these theoretical assumptions in mind, I suggest that the two perspectives —'political' and 'impolitical'— avoid reproducing the traditional gesture of political philosophy, namely, instituting a self-identical depoliticized community. On the contrary, they assume that antagonism is unavoidable and that the full reconciliation of the

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2   I use this term bearing in mind Heidegger's depiction of *Dasein* as an *Ek-sistent* together with his notion of *Mitsein*. With the notion of ek-sistence Heidegger tried to undo the metaphysical distinction between essence and existence, and show that *Dasein* is open to Being and implied in the world around him as In-der-Welt-Sein. I add the "co-" of co-ek-sistence recovering the Heideggerian notion of *Mitsein* to stress that political subjects always-already share, constitutively, this experience of the outside, of ecstasy, even of freedom in the ontological sense. It is precisely this notion of *Mitsein* that was rethought by Nancy and Esposito in order to elaborate a non-reified or subjectivist notion of community.

community is impossible. However, I suggest that their different approaches to the relation between the common and politics, subjectivity and political agency, leads to importantly different answers to the contemporary political situation.

To illuminate the first perspective, I will draw mainly on two major representatives of Lacanian post-Marxism: Laclau and Žižek. I also stage a dialogue with Rancière, whose theory occupies an intermediate position between both approaches.[3] For the second, I will comment on two Italian philosophers, Agamben and Esposito, whose works bear the influence of Heidegger since the 1970s, and of Foucault and Deleuze in the last two decades.[4]

The first perspective, which I call 'political', holds that even if the full realization of the community (full emancipation) is impossible, it is still necessary to employ negativity towards a positive project with a definite subject. The second, 'impolitical' perspective thinks the political from its borders and thus links the common to *inoperativeness* (Blanchot), thereby deconstructing an ontology based on the preeminence of *praxis* and subjectivity. In this sense, while Laclau and Žižek reinstate a form of socially construed transcendence, Agamben and Esposito oppose the community to such transcendence, which they figure as the continuation to a tradition of theologico-political sovereignty always founded in and upon violent exclusions. In this sense, while the former perspective sees political representation as necessary, the latter suggests that a community of singularities is *unrepresentable*, a fact which deactivates any productive overcoming of negativity, any *Aufhebung*.

In the next sections, I try to give a synthetic and inevitably simplified account of the different author's perspectives on the common and the political in their own terms. I do so in order to elucidate the political potential of each perspective for helping us re-think the operations of power and the opportunities of political action. In the process of this

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3   I thank an anonymous reviewer for helping me reflect more seriously on this issue. I will develop this idea further in the following sections.

4   We do not have enough space here to delve into the position that has developed more explicitly the notion of the common and the multitude in recent years drawing on the tradition of immanence that runs from Spinoza to Deleuze: that of Hardt & Negri, Lazzarato, Virno, etc. Hardt & Negri understand the common as the common-wealth "of the material world" (mainly natural resources) and the "results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth" (2009, viii). This perspective and that of an emerging bioeconomics will be analyzed in a future paper.

mutual delimitation, moreover, the deadlocks of each perspective will also come to light. I want to suggest that these authors attempt to offer political alternatives to what has been perceived in the West as *depoliticization*, without reinstating a normative discourse. And yet, as I will seek to demonstrate, only a mutual encounter of the two perspectives can offer glimpses of a proper account of today's forms of *governance*. Without such an encounter, activism based on the 'political' perspective's demands can reinforce domination in our *society of control* (Deleuze), while 'impolitical' forms of retreat and *inoperativeness* can amount to a withdrawal into an individual, aesthetic experience. Seen as a dialectical pair, the two positions can correct one another: the political stance serves to avoid a nihilistic stance towards politics, while *impolitical* thought might be a good antidote for preventing sacrificial and authoritarian forms of transcendence. Thus, in the final part of the paper I will suggest that an engagement with Žižek's analysis of capitalism and the full commodification of social life actually enables Agamben's reflections on *use* to gain new cogency as an alternative economy of social interaction, production and enjoyment.

II. The political perspective: from radical democracy to the universal exception

The political perspective I will consider here is that of so-called Post-Marxist thinkers. Post-Marxism, as elaborated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), was a deconstruction of the essentialist and economicist postulates of classical Marxism, giving priority to *antagonism* over *objective contradiction* to understand social change, thereby rethinking the Gramscian theory of *hegemony* in order to elaborate a new political theory from the Left. Whereas classical Marxism understood antagonism as class struggle and the proletariat as the subject of social emancipation, Laclau and Mouffe underlined the contingent nature of politics, which means that there is no privileged subject, locus or form of antagonism. Nonetheless, even if antagonism, which 'prevents society from being', is insurmountable (1990) it is still necessary to posit a political subject as the remainder of radical negativity that can lead to a new, more emancipated form of commonality. This political subject is seen as the *positive* result of an addition of differential negativities.

For Ernesto Laclau, the quasi-transcendental dislocation that prevents society from achieving full reconciliation makes possible the

notion of *radical democracy* (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). Far from characterizing a political regime, radical democracy indicates the potential to democratize every realm of social life within a pluralistic, multicultural society. It assumes the necessity of contingency (Marchart 2007, 11ss) and antagonism, avoiding any totalitarian closure of the social whole. In this way, Laclau and Mouffe supported liberal democracy while simultaneously re-evaluated the ontological role of politics. If for Marxism politics is traditionally configured in instrumental terms and reduced to the domain of the State, for Laclau and Mouffe politics is an instituting social practice that has no predefined ground, locus, subject or content.

Laclau explains the logic of politics through an ontology based on discourse analysis and a *generalized rhetoric* (2004, 13) in which any social practice can be understood as discursive insofar as it conveys meaning (1990, 2004; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). In his theory, social identities work as signifiers for other signifiers, and are thereby relational and differential. These identities come about as the result of *demands*, which are the minimum unit of social analysis. Different demands can be made to the political authorities by diverse groups which constitute their social identities through them. As long as these demands are satisfied *differentially* by the Administration, no counter-hegemonic commonality is formed. But when a quantity of them cannot be satisfied, a new central demand can emerge as the signifier of a common lack, and a *chain of equivalences* between different demands/identities can be formed around an *empty signifier*.[5] Empty signifiers "matter to politics" (1996) because they can give name to —and *condense*— a common lack. Thus they give rise to a *hegemonic* relation through the articulation of different demands and the *affective investments* in a name, and this, in return, retroactively constitutes the common identity. For Laclau, every social identity is politically construed this way. It does not precede its political expression. Identities are not the result of positive contents but of a common lack, and a chain of equivalences between different identities gives place to 'the people' as a political subjectivity when an antagonistic bloc towards those in power is formed around an empty signifier. This is, briefly put, the logic that characterizes Laclau's 'populism' (2005 & 1979).

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5   A chain of equivalences is an aggregate of negativities around an empty signifier. For instance, when 'democracy' is felt by most people as lacking, different people demands 'democracy'. Then, any political group which can identify its own struggle with that empty signifier can hegemonize the political situation forming a chain of equivalencies that articulates those different demands and identities.

Thus, Laclau's *rhetorical ontology* is immediately political insofar as every social identity is politically constructed and subject to *metonymic displacements* (*difference*) and *metaphorical condensations* (*equivalence*). The negativity of every signifier and its openness to a plurality of 'language games' (Wittgenstein) accounts for Laclau's anti-essentialism, as there is no positive term, no concrete or predefined demand that will lead to hegemony or to political investments. Also, there is no privileged locus or subjectivity for social antagonism, since every social identity is strictly differential, not depending on positive contents, allowing a plurality of contingent language games and political identities to be displayed. Therefore, every social identity is *differential*. However, this differentiality is partially suspended when a new political commonality is formed as antagonistic to those in power, when a new hegemonic signifier/Subject arises. But this can only take place through the emergence of a *popular demand*.

> We will call a demand which... remains isolated a *democratic demand*. A plurality of demands which, through their equivalential articulation, constitute a broader social subjectivity we will call popular demands — they start, at a very incipient level, to constitute the 'people' as a potential historical actor. Here we have, in embryo, a populist configuration. We already have two clear preconditions of populism: (1) the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the 'people' from power; and (2) an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the 'people' possible. There is a third precondition... the unification of these various demands... into a stable system of signification (2005, 74).

As we can see, Laclau maintains that 'the people' is the political and antagonistic subject to 'those in power' that emerges out of a political construction. For Laclau, politics are always hegemonic, since a particularity must assume the representation of the social whole through the constitution of a chain of equivalences. Politics are also 'populist' since the construction of the people is its first task: "There is no hegemony without constructing a popular identity out of a plurality of democratic demands" (2005, 95).

In a similar way, Rancière maintains that the political community can never be identical to itself because there are politics, because a part which has no assigned part in the community, the people, affirms itself and its freedom, as linguistic beings equal to any other, revealing the existence of politics as a space of *sharing [partage]*. Politics are practiced

by the party of the poor, as an activity of a common that is necessarily litigious (Rancière 1999) and that implies a democratic subjectification that puts into question the given organization of society. In this sense, democracy is

> The institution of politics itself, the system of forms of subjectification through which any order of distribution of bodies into functions corresponding to their 'nature' and places corresponding to their functions is undermined (Rancière 1999, 101).

Thus, whereas Laclau emphasizes the impossibility of a self-presentation of the people in contemporary society, and therefore the necessity of political representation to articulate different demands[6], Rancière (1999 & 2007) sees democracy as consisting of exceptional moments of politicization in which the common emerges from the bottom, contesting a state of affairs in which all parts of the society are assigned, asserting itself instead as an an-archic government where no title is needed to govern.

The two thinkers share the notion of *contingency* as the condition of (im)possibility of any social order and the opposition between *politics* and *administration* (which Rancière calls 'police'); politics is what disturbs the smooth functioning of the administration. However, Laclau extends the logic of contingency further than Rancière: against the misleading idea — frequent in radical political thought— that conservative politics are the negation of politics as such, Laclau defines politics by structure and not by content. Conservative politics, for him, are as political as radical politics. Thus, Laclau criticizes Rancière for excessively identifying the possibility of politics with emancipation (Laclau 2008b).

Accordingly, Laclau shows that no predefined realm or content is inherently political. *Everything can be politicized since nothing is political in itself*. In his view, politics are always hegemonic, so any universal value will be contaminated by a particularity that will contingently incarnate a universal signifier, which means that universality is not achievable as such. This is tantamount in avoiding any form of moral or political imperialism.

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6   Along this path, Laclau will criticize 'immanentist' theories of the multitude which, in his view, affirm that there is no need of such political articulation and that any form of political struggle affects directly the core of the Empire (Laclau, 2005; 2008). However, in *Commonwealth* Hardt & Negri address the problem of political articulation.

At this point, however, we may begin to note some potential problems in Laclau's account. First, the axiomatic assertion that political representation must be invested in a name that unifies "these various demands [...] into a stable system of signification" and the role of leadership in Laclau's idea of populism reveal that libidinal investments in a name cannot be easily separated from the investments in a body. Indeed, this investments seem to unify different demands within "the name of the leader" and not within empty signifiers like 'justice' or 'democracy'. When one recognizes that the master signifier is also the *master's* signifier, the real question becomes *who* has the power to impose meaning to these signifiers and incarnate them. In this context, Laclau's theory implies that effective political identities can only be construed through strong leadership, which, in my view, can lead to political heteronomy.

The second critique points to the limited capacity of an ontology based on the notion of demand to characterize today's politics, especially in developed societies where most demands are satisfied by the market. Even if one insists that Laclau's account is ontological, he recognizes that any ontology is molded by the ontic context of its production, enabling us to critique him on these grounds. Therefore, I see strong limits in Laclau's account on this point. First, it neither explains how demands and lack are created in our capitalistic societies, nor the way in which today's capitalism is predicated not on demands but rather upon the productiveness of desire. Furthermore, even if we accepted that we desire something to fill a lack, this lack and the objects we desire would already be determined by Ideology. Ideology is what 'teaches' us how and what to desire (Žižek) within the *noopolitical dispositifs* of neoliberal capitalism.[7]

These problems of the ideological production of desire and the political role of enjoyment are analyzed by Slavoj Žižek, who in his first writings supported the Laclauian idea of radical democracy, with its anti-totalitarian and pluralistic thrust (1989). Later, he criticized the logic of radical contingency to redefine antagonism as class struggle (2000). For him, there is not only a need to understand the formal logic of the political —as Laclau would do— but also to posit a positive content that accounts

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7　With *noopolitics* (*nous*: intellect) Lazzarato (2004) refers to a set of technics of control exerted upon the brain, implying its attention in order to control memory and its virtual potentialities. A paradigmatic example of these is marketing and advertising, which strive to capture our attention in order to modify our ways of feeling, thinking and behaving.

for the possibility of social change. For even if the struggles of different social identities can be 'progressive', they are *not necessarily* challenging what in his view always returns to the same place: *capitalism* as *Real* (1999, 2000). He maintains that radical democracy should no longer be a (political) democracy, since liberal democracy cannot be separated from capitalism. Put differently: in Žižek's view, since capitalism is the condition of possibility of liberal democracy, if we want to overcome capitalism we must also be ready to get rid of democracy.

No wonder that Laclau accused Žižek of recalling the 'worst tradition of non-deconstructed Marxism' and of wrongly reading Althusserian *over-determination* as 'determination in the last instance' (2000 & 2008). Whereas Laclau thinks that there is no transcendental *locus* for social antagonism and that every political articulation is contingent, Žižek maintains that the very possibility to perceive social identities as contingent only emerges in late capitalism. Indeed, the concept of contingency is for him the quasi-transcendental condition of possibility of our multicultural societies. Thus, in the last decade Žižek has associated Laclau's position with liberal multiculturalism and also dismissed any form of 'historicism', 'relativism' or 'deconstructionism' as part of the cultural logic of late, postmodern capitalism.

In this sense, whereas Laclau thinks politics through contingently construed identities, where universalism is always contaminated by particularism, Žižek will defend the possibility of a direct access to Universality. However, he will avoid a condemnatory approach to substantial identities. With regards to the notion of *community*, Žižek does not propose only a formal or negative approach like the *impolitical* one (see below). He states that when we confront ethnically-based communities, we must differentiate between the *latent dream thought* and the *desire* expressed in a dream. Therefore, the roots of fascism are not to be sought in the legitimate desire to form a substantial community. Rather, fascism inheres only in a way of *symbolizing* this wish as an explicit ideological text. Hence, fascist ideology tries to obscure the structural impossibility of fully realizing a community by blaming one of the community's parts for the presence of antagonism (Žižek 1993 & 2000). On the other hand, he states that what holds communities together is not a common identification but rather a *dis-identification*, a way of organizing *enjoyment* through the disavowed transgression of public rules (2005, 55): "the fear of 'excessive' identification is [...] the fundamental feature of the late-

capitalist ideology" (1993, 237). Hence he maintains —in contrast to Laclau— that *over-identification* is more subversive than fighting 'essentialism' and 'fixed-identities'.

Also Rancière will theorize disidentification but in a different sense. Rather than organizing communal enjoyment, disidentification is a necessary step in political subjetification, in which a part of the community stages a *wrong* that challenges the current division of the sensible and removes itself from the names and places that where assigned to it. For Rancière, politics is a matter of 'modes of subjectification'.

> By *subjectification* I mean the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience (1999, 35).

At the same time:

> Any subjectification is a disidentification, removal from the naturalness of a place, the opening up of a subject space where anyone can be counted since it is the space where those of no account are counted, where a connection is made between having a part and having no part (1999, 36).

As we will see, these ideas of disidentification together with the conception of politics as *interruption* of the given order (*police*) are also crucial for the impolitical approach. However, since disidentification implies for Rancière a way of *political subjectification* of a part that names itself the *people* and identifies itself "with the whole of the community" (1999, 9), Rancière's approach might be considered a political one.

In his own terms, he shares Laclau's and Žižek's idea that community is both necessary and impossible because there is an antagonism which prevents society from being. For Žižek, however, this *Real* is a positive 'entity' called *capitalism.* And yet its exception, its *symptom,* (or *the part of those who have no part* in Rancière's terms) is the place from which true Universality can emerge against globalization (i.e. the universalization of Capital). In this sense, against the 'postmodern' assertion of contingency, Žižek affirms, following Alain Badiou, the existence of a Truth which can only be seen from the point of view of those already committed to it (1989; 1997; 2000 & 2004). Indeed, for Žižek a true community, even human survival, hinges upon the assertion of Truth and of a new form of communism, since the market can only lead

to catastrophe (2008, 420-30). In this sense, besides the crucial antagonism between the excluded and the included, Žižek points out three domains of antagonisms between the commons (Negri) and their commodification: in culture or socio-symbolic space, in outer nature (environment) and inner nature (biogenetics).

> It is this reference to 'commons' —this substance of productivity which is neither private nor public— which justifies the resuscitation of the notion of communism. The commons can thus be linked to what Hegel… deployed as die Sache, the shared social thing-cause, «the work of all and everyone», the substance kept alive by incessant subjective productivity (2008, 429).

Affirming the *necessity* of communism for the world to survive, Žižek maintains that the real utopists are the free-market liberals who believe we have approached the end of history and dream of a happy capitalism without antagonism.

So, rather than providing the formal logic of the political, Žižek tries to elaborate a critique of our society, showing that every realm of social life is being commodified and that, under certain circumstances, the desire to form a substantial community can lead to forms of resistance to full commodification.

Like Laclau, however, Zizek's view also reveals some inconsistencies. For one, naming capitalism as Real symbolizes the Real, which in turn makes it insurmountable: we can work to change our symbolic order, but something that is Real is by definition beyond our reach.

To sum up, what characterizes the political perspective is the idea that antagonism is unavoidable and, at the same time, that every social practice can be, in the last resort, political. Nonetheless, whereas Laclau, Mouffe and Rancière stress the contingent nature of politics, Žižek tries to symbolize antagonism that impedes society's fullness as 'class struggle'. In this sense, whereas the first authors think the formal conditions for radical-democratic politics, the latter seems more ready to think the problems that arise in today's capitalism, connecting his reflection on ideology with the problem of the expropriation of the common raised by Hardt and Negri. This notion of the common beyond the opposition between public and private leads us to the *impolitical* perspective and its focus on the notions of singularity and *inoperativeness*.

III. The impolitical perspective: the exposure to the common

The *impolitical* perspective, like its political counterpart, conceives politics as a conflictive reality. However, impolitical theorists focus on the *community* as the key figure to think the common as a sphere of constitutively impossible harmony. Although this approach shares the anti-identitarian, anti-totalitarian and anti-essentialist view of politics we find in Laclau and Mouffe, it does not consider the common as a result of political subjectification and libidinal investments. Impolitical thought conceives the common as a dimension that precedes and exceeds both politics and subjectivity giving 'voice' to coexistence: something that is impossible to *produce.*

In fact, this perspective considers politics as an *interruption* that does not lead to new institutional foundations.[8] Thinking the common from a philosophy of *im-potentiality* (Agamben 2005a), and as neither substantial nor subjective, the impolitical also opposes any stance that founds the common in the *proprium* (as identities or interests), or in any presupposition. The community does not belong to its subjects and the subjects don't belong to the community: community is rather the transcendental condition that expropriates them as closed selves, exposing them to their *being-in-common.* In this sense, the *community* is a limit-concept of political philosophy because it remains *ontologically* impossible (Tarizzo 2003). In our view, the political stake of this thought is to empty any form of political mediation and sovereignty of its foundations in order to think coexistence beyond any transcendent Power.

But let us clarify what we understand by *impolitical* (also translated recently as *unpolitical*). The term *impolitico* was first used by Massimo Cacciari in an article about Nietzsche (1978) and re-elaborated by Roberto Esposito (1988 & 1993), as a way to consider the political from its borders, staging an alternative to both political theology and modern de-politicization. Its stance is neither directly political, nor anti-political, since that would presuppose the reduction of politics to a Value or Norm and a dialectical movement which this kind of thought tries to avoid. The *impolitical* implied a movement of *retreat* (Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe 1983) which redefined the relation between philosophy and politics, once the model of the Gramscian *organic intellectual* proved no longer

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8   As mentioned above, also Rancière shares the idea of politics as an interruption. In his case, this interruption enables the expression of an egalitarian logic through political subjectification.

practicable for most of the European Left. For Esposito, the *impolitical* takes us beyond any political philosophy, understood as a tradition in which politics is measured by its correspondence with a good philosophy and philosophy is evaluated by its capacity to transform politics (1999).

Undoubtedly, most intellectuals we would include in the 'political' perspective also *retreat* into an ontological reflection that departs from political philosophy thus described. But while in the political perspective there is a need to rethink political subjectivity and emancipation, for the *impolitical* vision, politics and community defy subjectivity and actually imply processes of de-subjectification. At the same time, the impolitical tries to think the *factum* of the political in a realistic, non-apologetic way.

The philosopher who develops an explicit reflection on the *impolitical* in these terms is Roberto Esposito, who maintained in the 1980's that our political language was obsolete since our present-day reality could not be apprehended through it.[9] As long as there was no alternative language, the only possibility was to think the political in negative terms, deconstructing its traditional categories. The *impolitical* stance tried to show the ambiguities and deadlocks of our political concepts and dichotomies, overturning the political notions of modernity in order to exhibit the void that inhabits their core (Weil in Esposito 1988; 1996).

This deconstruction of every political term was also employed to re-think the notion of *community*. Traditionally, the community was thought as the result of shared properties (ethnicity, race, language, territory), projects or interests. On the contrary, the impolitical stance would begin by thinking community as 'structured' by sharing a common *impossibility*: for instance, that of dying in the place of the other (Blanchot 1983) or of sharing the other's death (Nancy 1999) or dying together as in Bataille's account of *Numancia* (Esposito 1999).

Later, presenting this deconstructive insight in positive terms, Esposito elaborated a tension between *Communitas* and *Immunitas*. Both terms share the reference to *munus*, understood as a compulsory gift, but differ in the way they relate to it.[10] If *im-munitas* designates the exemption, the dispensation from the common *munus* that characterizes modern philosophical, juridical, anthropological and medical thought through the

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9   In the last decade, Esposito seems to have found this positive language that can help us understand our present in biopolitics and the paradigm of immunization (2002, 2004, 2007).

10 As Esposito states, the concept of munus has three meanings: *onus*, *officium* and *donum*. However, he clearly privileges the latter.

assertion of the *proprium*, *com-munitas* implies a positive *relation* (*cum*) to it, our common *exposure* to a threatening, violent, mandatory gift. What we have in common, then, is nothing but this gift, this exposure to the possibility of mutual *contagion*, which has to be avoided for any immunitarian stance that protects life through its negation.

Nonetheless, a form of immunity is necessary if life is to be conserved or developed. In this sense, present-day biopower —in which the protection and increase of the quality of life is the only issue that legitimizes a government— can be understood through immunization paradigm as a series of measures to protect communitarian and individual life within the framework of a self-same social body in which the threatening dimension of the common, the possibility of transgressing boundaries, is kept at bay. When an exaggerated form of immunization arises, it ends up attacking the same body it strives to protect, as in auto-immune diseases. But immunity does not necessarily lead to a thanatological, auto-immunitarian outcome. To the contrary, Esposito's idea of a *common immunity*, exemplified by *pregnancy,* in which the mother protects the embryo despite the *difference* of their genetic codes (2002), offers a paradigm in which life emerges through the conflict between two immunities. In this sense, difference becomes the condition for coexistence and common growth in an ontology based not on *presupposition* but in *ex-position*. It is precisely through the concept of ex-position that Esposito will try to think affirmative, communitarian biopolitics.

By 'ex-position' we must understand a radical shift in the concept of co-existence. Traditional metaphysics have thought a Ground or Substance of which the concrete existence would derive its meaning. In politics, there was always the idea of a shared, presupposed element grounding the community or a Subject instituting it. On the contrary, the logic of exposition deconstructs the opposition between essence and appearance, expressing that things, bodies, ideas, etc., co-belong without any ground other than co-belonging itself. Indeed, *the common is not a result of some prior ground but the pure event of being-with*, which is another way to affirm *radical contingency*.

The logic of *exposition* is also developed by Agamben's notion of community as the co-appearance of '*whatever singularities*' (1990). For Agamben, power *dispositifs* and metaphysical thought always work by separating two poles, producing the possibility of an *inclusive exclusion* of

one of them by the other: *bios* and *zoé*, *logos* and *phoné*, *human* and *animal*. In historic communities this exclusion renders the excluded *sacer*, i.e., possible to kill without committing homicide or sacrifice, thereby turning *exclusion* into a transcendental presupposition for belonging. Agamben opposes to this the notion of the *coming community* (1990), which is not founded in any subjective property as identities or interests, but rather on the very event of co-belonging without any presupposition. Against the notion of a *community of those who don't have one* (Bataille, Nancy, Blanchot) or as *nothing in common* (Esposito, 1998) he thinks of a community in which *the only condition for belonging is belonging itself* (1990).

Agamben is also critical of the stances which —like that of Esposito and Mauss— focus on the notion of *mandatory* gift. Agamben instead privileges the notion of *grace*, as "the ability to use the sphere of social determinations and services in its totality" (2008b, 115). For Agamben, grace does not found social exchanges, but rather interrupts them. This insistence on grace (*charis*) derives from the Pauline and later Franciscan notion of use (*chrésis*) —which deactivates obligations and the Law— as opposed to property (*dominium*), and leads him to propose *profanations* as the restitution of objects to a *free use*, against the idea of *secularization*, in which the sacred dimension and its power effects secretly insist (2005a; 2011b).[11] Hence, Agamben understands the messianic community as an interruption of the *proprium* through a new, profane use: "the messianic vocation is not a right and does not constitute an identity: it is a generic Potentiality which is used without being its proprietors" (2008b, 31).

This notion of the messianic community is developed by Agamben in his reading of Paul's *Epistle to the Roman*s, in which he explores the logic of *as-if-not* (*hos me*) and of deactivation (*katargein*).[12] For Agamben, Paul is not the founder of universalism as Badiou (1997) maintains but rather the one who divides every nomistic division with the imperceptible Apelles'

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11 As we can see, this idea is crucial in our digital era, in which the conditions for a free and common use of the produce of the general intellect are thwarted by the institution of property and the commodification of the common. For Negri and Hardt, this fully intellectualization of labor, with its accent on affects and communication preannounces the new communism of the multitude (1995, 2000, 2004, 2009). Agamben has also theorized about the general intellect and the multitude in order to rethink the common and to characterize his notion of form-of-life (2000, 10-11). However, departing from Negri's thought, he opposes the dominant role of production and subjectivity in Western metaphysics.

12 Agamben notes that the French *désœuvrement* (Kojeve, Bataille, Blanchot, Nancy) is a good translation of *katargein*.

cut, making impossible for the whole and the part to coincide. Paul's universalism is not just indifferent to differences but rather cuts across and suspends every previous identity, inviting us to make a new use of ourselves as-if we were not who we are. The stake is not just to change our juridical status or identity or to enforce a new Law but to *deactivate* (*katargein*) them.

In his view, both the Messianic and the state of exception work through suspension. But while, according to Agamben, today we live in a virtual state of exception in which the Law is suspended but still enforced, making life prone to be eliminated, Paul's messianism —which Agamben reads through Benjamin's glasses— strives to produce a *real state of exception* in which Law and Life coincide.[13] This coincidence is elsewhere termed by Agamben *form-of-life*, a life that cannot be separated from its form, in which a bare life cannot be produced. (2000, 3; 2011b)

In this sense, Agamben opposes the *community* of whatever singularities (1990), and a *form-of-life* based in the Franciscan notion of use (2011b), to the sovereign power of the state. (1995) For Agamben, the state produces and at the same time tries to capture the exception —the *bare life* of the *homo sacer*— and rule through it. It legitimizes its own power through the *representation* of social identities which are based on bare life. On the contrary, the *community* recognizes no presuppositions and no representation. It is an un-founded, indestructible *remnant* [resto], where singularities co-belong, being-such: "the state can recognize any assertion of identity [...] but that the singularities form community without asserting an identity [...] that is what the state cannot tolerate under any circumstances" (1990, 58-59).

Here we see the contrast between Agamben's position and that of Laclau and Žižek. While according to Laclau the logic of hegemony and articulation implies a political constitution of *identities* and a struggle between them to represent the whole, Agamben is seeking an Unrepresentable *remnant* that gets rid of previous identities and threatens the State's sovereign violence. At the same time, while Žižek sees dis-identification as the element that holds together empirical communities and calls for an ethics of over-identification, Agamben expresses the need to elude identification since by producing identities power *dispositifs*

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13 Drawing on the latter's idea of *communicability* and of *divine violence*, as a violence that does not institute a new Law, Agamben thinks the coming politics as *a means without ends* which should turn the virtual (Schmittean) state of exception in which we live into a real (Benjaminian) one (1995).

capture our attempts of subjectification.[14] That is why the community Agamben is trying to think is beyond identity, since, for him, contemporary politics have already emptied any tradition or identity of meaning and deal only with bare life (2000). On the contrary, the messianic community cannot be institutionalized, because every form of institutionalization or representation implies its authoritarian negation: "when the ekklesía —the messianic community— wants to organize itself, the problem of the right doctrine and infallibility becomes crucial" (2008b, 37).

In this sense, while Laclau and Žižek introduce a transcendent dimension in politics (party, state, leader, empty signifier), the impolitical perspective thinks community outside the transcendence of sovereign power, understanding it as a sacrificial machine. Against such view, Laclau maintains that to be beyond sovereignty and exclusion is to be *beyond politics* and that Agamben's idea of politics is based on the myth of a fully reconciled community (Laclau 2008, 123). As we saw, for Laclau this reconciliation is impossible since the extension of structural dislocations at work in contemporary capitalism make visible the contingency and precariousness of any objectivity and create a plurality of new antagonisms, opening unprecedented possibilities for the radicalization of democracy and political articulation. In this sense, processes of commodification, bureaucratization, etc. do not give birth to a self-regulated totality. On the contrary, they open up the possibility of new political struggles and change (Laclau, 1990). In Agamben's view, however, such dislocations —the Spectacle, the capitalist expropriation of language and thought, the dissolution of traditional identities— are the precondition for a redemptive outcome, namely a community or form-of-life beyond sovereignty and property in which the role of politics is difficult to grasp.

In this sense, while for Laclau any commonality is the precarious result of political representation and hegemony, for 'impolitical' authors the community is *unrepresentable* (Esposito 1988), it cannot be *produced* but it can *take place* (Agamben, 1990). However, there is an important difference between Esposito and Agamben. For the first, *the community is not something that relates what it is, but being itself as relation*. For the latter, the common and the political must be thought beyond any form of

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14 As we saw above, disidentification is for Rancière a condition of policial subjetification.

relation, where the first step is to think potentiality without any relation to actuality (1995). In this sense, *whatever singularity*, as a reformulation of *Dasein*, means for Agamben the impossibility of isolating substance and modes, individuality and universality. At stake here is a form-of-life which reflects human life as (im)potentiality, since human beings have no predefined biological task (2000).

Also, whereas Laclau and Žižek strive to rethink political subjectivities, Agamben and Esposito explore the *Impersonal* dimension that exceeds the subjective and legal status of the *person* which, in their view, produces the separations between higher and lower forms of life. The stake for both authors is to think a life-in-common previous to the divide between *bios* and *zoé*, *person* and *non-person* by the Legal apparatus. Indeed, through this notion of *impersonal life*, Esposito tries to think the possibility of *affirmative biopolitics*, turning against themselves the *dispositifs* that Nazism employed against its victims (Esposito 2004 & 2007). In his view, if biopolitics continue to lead to the destruction of the only thing that can legitimate today's governments (life itself) it is because the *dispositif* of the person is founded upon the separation between *bios* and *zoé*, qualified life and mere life.

Like Agamben, Esposito opposes the community of singularities to state sovereignty. However, he considers that the notion of *profanations* implies that something should be *consecrated* first in order to be later made profane (2010), while immunization paradigm remains always attached to the immanence of life itself. In this sense, while Agamben has to recourse to Messianism to think politics, for Esposito immunization implies that a politics of life (*politica della vita*) can be thought out of any theologico-political root, in the same terrain of biopower.

Indeed, the recourse to religious categories to think the political in the last decades would reveal our incapacity to eschew the theologico-political paradigm. However, Esposito's formulation arrives at a deadlock when trying to think politics in positive terms, since the immunization paradigm can only be a quasi-transcendental framework for present-day politics that cannot offer any positive content. That is the reason why when he tries to think *affirmative biopolitics*, instead of drawing from *political* experiences, he makes use of metaphors like *birth*, or philosophical categories such as *norm-of-life* (Canguilhem), *chair* (Merleau-Ponty), or *impersonal life* (Deleuze). At the same time, this is why the prefix we find in all his notions is the «im-», from the impolitical to the

impersonal through immunization.

To sum up, impolitical authors criticize any form of mediation of the community in a separate sphere, any form of representation which, as Esposito maintains, is always a representation of Order (1993). They also criticize the role identities play in politics. They share a moment of retreat and the assertion of norm/form-of-life (Esposito 2004; Agamben 2011b) against any type of legal and political transcendence. These authors are critical of liberal democracy since it can be seen as immunitarian (Esposito 2008) and since the predominance of *government* has done away with any form of popular sovereignty (Agamben 2011a). Nonetheless, despite writing about government and biopolitics, these authors usually have a negative approach on power that does not let them consider seriously present day *governance*.[15] We will come back to this in the concluding remarks.

IV. Concluding remarks

In this paper I tried to show that political and impolitical perspectives think the common in a non-foundational way, as they do not presuppose any substantial or stable ground for it. At the same time, both recognize that a full closure or total reconciliation of the community is impossible and has proved politically deadly. However, as we have seen, they are not post-foundational in the same way: while the *political perspective* tries to fill the void of the community and «name the nothing» stressing the relevance of politically construed identities (Laclau) and the ontological function of the Subject as the absent center of political ontology (Žižek), the *impolitical* suggests that this void should not be filled if we want to avoid new modes of thanatological exclusion. While for the first perspective the common is *politically construed*, for the second it is *beyond politics* and cannot be politically produced. That is why the first assumes that politics consist in activism and strives to find an emancipatory subject (the people, the proletariat, etc.) while in *impolitical* thought the stake is to deactivate any form of subjectivity and power, in

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15 In *Il regno e la gloria* (2007), Agamben speaks of a bi-polar machine constituted by sovereignty and *oikonomical* government, in which the latter predominates. Nonetheless, instead of giving an account of today's theories and practice of governance, he makes an archeology of theological texts to reveal the separation between a transcendent reign of god, who reigns but doesn't govern, and the immanent *oikonimical* government by the angels (ministers). Also Esposito (2013) refers to economics through the filter of the theological debate.

order to avoid reinforcing the domination over life, namely, the capture of subjectification by power *dispositifs*. That is why Agamben stresses the necessity to think ontology beyond the paradigm of *operativeness* and *effectiveness* as a first step to rethink politics (2012) and Esposito tries to think the Impersonal as the improper dimension of life common to every being.

Therefore, the main questions that divide the two views are: is a community of singularities the result of political action or impolitical deactivation? We may add: does deactivation lead to a depoliticized, aesthetic or ethicist stance? And also: what form of commonality is thinkable within and beyond today's society of control?

So far, I have tried to suggest that both approaches provide useful insights to think politics and commonality in our societies, but that none of them is completely satisfactory, and that their limits come to light as a function of their mutual delimitation. On the side of the political, forms of progressive political activism can reinforce domination and control despite themselves. On the side of the impolitical, forms of exodus and retreat from sovereignty can have unforeseen political effects. However, what is missing in both approaches is, first, a better account of today's forms of domination and, then, new ideas concerning an alternative political power that could provide the chance to avoid the choice between 'inoperativeness', 'neo-Stalinism' and 'investments in a name', i.e., between trying to interrupt the 'machine' without enabling a political alternative and the institution of new forms of heteronomy.

In this sense, the *impolitical* view allows us to bear in mind the deadlocks of subjectivist approaches to the notion of community, which seem to lead sooner or later to re-establish the idea that it can be *produced* by a party, ethnical identity or any privileged Subject, in a sacrificial and authoritarian position. On the other hand, the 'political stance' is also important to understand possible ways of political subjectification, trying to avoid a nihilistic standpoint towards politics. Indeed, if impolitical thought becomes a critical stance towards any actual politics, it risks becoming *ultrapolitical*,[16] in the sense of being *beyond* politics, always needing to face the Leviathan in order to be sure we are on the good side.

But is any form of political institution a kind of 'cold monster'? Or should we focus on forms of government? Is the retreat from the State an

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16 I thank Bruno Bosteels for discussing this point with me back in 2010.

existential need, an ethical imperative or a suicidal action? We have already commented on Laclau's critique of Agamben's dream of politics without exclusions. Similarly, Žižek (2008) criticizes the retreat from state power by suggesting that 'local struggles' and 'infinite demands'[17] only reinforce the position of those who rule. Instead of resisting state power or retreating from it, he suggests that true revolutionaries should try to seize it (2007). But does it make any sense to speak today of 'true revolutionaries' and the seizure of state power in complex and globalized societies?

In my view, *the limits of both perspectives stem from the very diagnoses they make*. Despite providing useful insights, both stances have a reductive understanding of today's forms of domination, which undermines their capacity to elaborate a positive account of the communality to emerge and politics to come. In this sense, *impolitical* thought seems to be still secretly obsessed with sovereign power and with theological and juridical *dispositifs* when today's forms of (bio)power are much more subtle and productive. While it is true that the exception became the rule of government and that racism is far from being overcome, what is taking place in today's *societies of control* is rather the 'inclusion of the outside'. Whereas classic sovereign power and even disciplinary societies belong to a mechanical-analogical era, today's biopolitical or *noopolitical* (Lazzarato 2004) power became molecular, informational and digital (Deleuze 1990; Sibilia 2005). Today's main forms of (bio)power do not forbid or enclose bodies but modulate subjectivities at a distance, and the subject/object of power is not only the *population* as a biological aggregate but also the *public* as a sociological reality. Today's (bio)power does not employ our muscles, but stimulates our neural centers. It does not to forbid our enjoyment but makes it mandatory.

The oppressive contours of this *injunction to enjoy* have been analyzed by Žižek through the study of the Lacanian *superego* (passim). In a way, it has also been recognized by Agamben, who stresses the impossibility to resist a Power that makes us believe that everything can be done, separating us from our potentiality not-to-do (2009, 69). However, this problem is absent in Esposito and Laclau's accounts.

Indeed, even though Laclau's logic of politics seems to work at the level of political discourse and aggregation, he does not engage in

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17 Here Zizek attacks Critchley's book *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, London: Verso, 2007.

understanding today's forms of power in 'developed societies' where *demands* and *desires* are more likely to be construed and fulfilled through marketing and consumption or self-entrepreneurship rather than by libidinal investments in politics. Nowadays the 'affective investment in a name' with which Laclau describes the construction of 'the people' is likely to be done by political marketing. Besides, it also implies the identification with a body that incarnates the community, reinstating a theological dimension in politics. A postmodern theology in which no Idea mobilizes the people: only a name, or slogan.

Of course, my assertion implies leaving aside contingency for a moment and taking a 'substantive' and 'outmoded' view of politics as something different from marketing and consumption. It also implies a critical view on marketing as a subtler but no less authoritarian way of constructing political images and social identities compared to the Totalitarian propaganda. However, as mentioned above, this spectacularization of politics and this commodification of social identities can have a positive outcome for both Laclau and Agamben. For the first, the dislocations these processes imply open the possibility of new demands, struggles and political articulation. For the latter, the possibility of a community without identity is the result of the expropriation of the Common brought about by today's capitalism and this opportunity should be *used* against the Spectacle (1990). In this sense, the logic of *profanation* implies the possibility to create an alternative economy of social interaction, production and enjoyment related to what Agamben calls *use*.

The absence of a study of today's governance is also a problem in Esposito's account. Although drawing on Foucault and Deleuze, Esposito's reflection has not fully engaged with an analysis of the economic and subjective aspects of today's forms of power which employ the subjects' desires and creativity in their reproduction. Even if he has tried to overcome a merely deconstructive approach through the immunization paradigm, his analyses remain all too ontological. First, even though he acknowledges the necessity of conflict for politics, he never privileges a particular form of politics. Second, despite that he recognizes transformations in the exercise of power, his diagnosis —like Agamben's— seems too obsessed with Sovereign Power and its legal apparatus. Third, as said before, his idea of affirmative biopolitics draws on examples we can barely call political. Assuming that any form of action

means the increase of violence, Esposito proposes to rethink the impersonal dimension and, like Agamben, to advocate a 'mystical' life that cannot be separated from its forms, a deactivation of both the Law and its subject.

In this sense, I think the gesture of retreating to think the common in its ontological, a-subjective and *impersonal* condition is *only* a first step. If today's forms of domination involve our whole 'being and time', if the administration and the corporations treat us as a sample of *prosumers* from whom they can obtain 'valuable' information through new forms of confession to capture our desires for their profit and reproduction, one of the resources at hand is to deny our participation, 'become invisible', and deactivate this *governmentality* that puts to work our political capabilities (Virno 2001). However, without considering political subjectivization one cannot avoid the risk of treating any form of real political action as a simulacrum that doesn't correspond to its ontological truth (Bosteels 2009).

Then, my suggestion here is that in order to redefine the contours of the common we need a new *politics* which should not be the same play of ideologically overdetermined desires, particular demands and its representation through *spectacular* politics or strong and *glorified* leaderships. In this sense, Agamben's idea of *use* (2011b) is interesting since nowadays social cooperation and codependence has reached a point in which in a way we already form a global community and have to decide what sense we will give to our coexistence and how will we use the resources at hand. While the capitalist logic will employ this cooperation for private benefit without any concern for the common, Agamben invites us to think *new uses*, not only of objects but also of ourselves, of our common world, without *abusing* it, in a community of singularities without conditions for belonging.

How to translate this ontological view into political action is a great challenge. For even if re-thinking the common and politics anew is necessary, the ontological speculation should not be a psychological compensation for good politics' absence but rather a step in inventing new political practices in which a more emancipated commonality can emerge. In this sense, the impolitical gesture of retreat might be tactically useful against a power that involves our subjectivities in its reproduction, but the real stake of this retreat is whether a new politics can be *re-traced* (Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe 1997). That is why new *uses* must be

invented, *profaning* an outdated idea of property and also an authoritarian notion of politics in order to produce new political experiences. To do so, we cannot sever the common from the political: not even with Apelles's help.

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