

Fourth Person. From the Impersonal to the Unavailable

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I will try to analyze the very movement of Esposito's thought towards positive, affirmative politics of life based on a positive, affirmative philosophy of life. From my point of view, this philosophical and political passage is extremely difficult if not dangerous. In order to illustrate both the dangers and positive virtualities of Esposito's thought I will focus on three conceptual pairs: subject/life, *communitas/immunitas*, and impersonal/unavailable. The first two pairs are taken from Esposito's works, the last one is mine and hints at further theoretical developments.

Keywords: Life, Subject, Immanence, Common, People.

In this paper I will briefly question Roberto Esposito's *research*. However, I will not build upon any of the already capitalized outcomes of his work, whose richness and significance are quite evident to everybody. Rather, I will try to analyze the very movement or actual tendency of his thought towards positive, affirmative politics of life based on a positive, affirmative philosophy of life. From my point of view, this philosophical and political passage is extremely difficult, I would even say dangerous – but I will not speak of its dangers here. On the contrary, I will try to highlight some of the great potentialities of Esposito's work, which seem to me still hidden and partially unexpressed.

In the post-metaphysical framework of present philosophy, Esposito's work is remarkable for its courage in drawing our attention to a classical problem of metaphysical thinking, the problem of the origin. The word «origin» even appears in the title of two books written by Esposito, *Communitas: Origin and Destiny of the Community*, and *Living Thought: Origin and Actuality of Italian Philosophy*. These essays represent the forerunner and most

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recent step, respectively, of a philosophical itinerary that continually turns around the question of the origin. «This –the constituent non-originary of history– is exactly what makes origin always contemporary to the historical moment, though in a latent manner, and what makes it always reactivable as an energetic reserve».¹

Reading these lines, one cannot help thinking of Michel Foucault's and Gilles Deleuze's protest against metaphysics and their virulent criticism of any metaphysical reference to the «power of origin». From Foucault's point of view, as one can infer from his violent reply to Jacques Derrida regarding Descartes' *Cogito*, the danger of metaphysics lies specifically in «the assignation of the originary as said and not-said in the text». This means that metaphysics always attempts to introduce itself as a kind of pedagogy. «A pedagogy which teaches the student that there is nothing outside the text, but that in it, in its interstices, in its blanks and silences, the reserve of the origin reigns; that it is never necessary to look beyond it, but that here, not in the words of course, but in words as crossings-out, in their *lattice*, what is said is “the meaning of being”. A pedagogy that inversely gives to the voice of the masters that unlimited sovereignty that allows it indefinitely to re-say the text».² Inasmuch as Esposito's books are mainly commentaries on other texts, one can immediately wonder whether these words can apply to his work as well.

Along with Foucault, Deleuze is surely the philosopher whose influence on Esposito is the deepest and most significant. However, according to Deleuze too, the notion of origin is wholly unacceptable. Indeed, origin is traditionally conceived by metaphysics as the hidden meaning of history, a meaning or a sense buried in every historical moment and always contemporary to it, though in a latent manner. «For, in any case, heavenly or subterranean, sense is presented as Principle, Reservoir, Reserve, Origin. As heavenly Principle, it is said to be fundamentally forgotten and veiled or, as subterranean principle, it is said to be deeply erased, diverted, and alienated. But beneath the erasure and the veil, we are summoned to rediscover and to restore meaning, in either a God which was not well enough understood, or in a man not fully fathomed. It is thus pleasing that there resounds today the news that sense is never a principle or an origin».³ Inasmuch as Esposito's philosophy looks today at the vital, impersonal, subterranean stratum of man traditionally meant as a «person», one can immediately wonder whether these words can apply to his work as well.

1 R. Esposito, *Pensiero vivente. Origine e attualità della filosofia italiana*, Einaudi, Torino, 2010, p. 25.

2 M. Foucault, “My Body, This Paper, This Fire”, in M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, Routledge, London, 2006, p. 573.

3 G. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1990, p. 72.

Assuming that it be possible to describe the notion of origin in terms of «immanence» or «life», as Esposito has suggested in his most recent works, could we avoid any metaphysical deviation in our theoretical approach to human beings? The answer should be much longer and deeper than the one I will be able to delineate. To begin with, a simple and straight question: Is the notion of immanence a truly post-metaphysical category of philosophical thought? It is quite hard to believe so. Deleuze himself seems perfectly aware of this when, in his last article *L'immanence: une vie...*, he quotes Fichte, no less.⁴ In other words, the idea of immanence takes us back to the core of modern metaphysics, instead of taking us out of it. From Kant onward, modern metaphysics has been defined as a metaphysics of immanence. As Fichte clearly states, «Critical philosophy is, therefore, *immanent*, because it posits all in the Ego; dogmatism is, on the contrary, *transcendent*, because it proceeds beyond the Ego».⁵

Attempting to identify immanence with «life» does not push any new philosophical boundaries. On the contrary, given that «life» is a key word of late modern metaphysics, this identification of life and immanence resurfaces one of the most canonical patterns of metaphysical thinking. «Immanent is a life stemming from itself, a life not postposited, nor subposited, to any subjective figure, shaped in any fashion, placed before its own development».⁶

Let us briefly analyze this philosophically demanding statement made by Esposito in his last book. Everything turns around the notion of subjectivity or subject. According to Esposito, immanent is a life stemming from itself, but not postposited, nor subposited, to any subjectivity. Yet, if life really stems from itself, this means that life always presupposes itself. Otherwise, how could life stem from itself? It would be impossible for life to stem from itself, if life were not present before itself, before its own development.

Life does not correspond, Esposito insists, to any subjective figure that might be placed before its own development. But this is true only if life is not conceived as the subject itself. Now, following Esposito's argument, what is the subject? The subject is precisely what always presupposes itself, that which always places itself before itself –i.e. the subject is what always stems from itself. «In order to be itself, the subject has to presuppose itself».⁷ That is the reason why life, in Esposito's work, is finally the name of the subject– a well-known name in late modern metaphysics.

4 G. Deleuze, "L'immanence: une vie..." (1995), in G. Deleuze, *Deux régimes de fous. Textes et entretiens 1975-1995*, Minuit, Paris, 2003, p. 361.

5 J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, J.B. Lippincott & Co., Philadelphia, 1868, pp. 94-95.

6 R. Esposito, *Pensiero vivente*, cit., p. 264.

7 Ibidem, p. 260.

I do not want to repeat here what I have already explained in my last book, which was entirely focused on the question of life itself.⁸ Esposito's philosophy of life, in my modest opinion, does not succeed in escaping the metaphysical tradition whose main features I have attempted to outline. Thus, his generous reference to me at the end of *Living Thought* has to be framed by a brief comment. Esposito claims that: «If life should not be postposited, neither should it be presupposed to the subjects that are embodying it every time. Rather, life has to be conceived as the living substance of their infinite singularity».⁹ This is the goal, Esposito then states in a footnote, that my own research strives to achieve. I must confess that I find this perspective debatable. More importantly, I do not find Esposito's thought to be wholly devoted to this specific goal. On the contrary, I am persuaded to believe that his thought is moving in an opposite direction, though without his being fully conscious of doing so.

Esposito's «living thought» is based on the particular relation between *communitas* and *immunitas*, which are seen as two opposite poles that attract and simultaneously reject each other. Since each of these poles is the exact «reverse» of the other, one can logically wonder whether each of these poles should also be conceived as the *determinate negation* of the other. Put differently: Can we interpret the relation between *communitas* and *immunitas* in terms of dialectic relation? This is something to reflect on.

According to Esposito the notion of *communitas* takes root in French Theory, especially by authors such as Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy, along with Heidegger, who coined the term *Mit-Sein*. All these thinkers declare war against any substantialistic metaphysics. As Esposito says, these are thinkers who do not speculate about any «common substance» or property but rather about «pure relationship, always singular and plural».¹⁰ How consistent should Esposito's refusal of the idea of a «common substance» be with his endorsement of the forementioned notion of a «living substance»? Whatever might be the answer, life is not the first to announce itself in the *communitas*; the first is death. *Am Anfang war der Tod*. A death in common, or «nothing in common», lies behind every *communitas* of subjects who, by giving each other the gift of death, are thus devoid of their auto-thetical or auto-positing power.¹¹ The Latin word *communitas*, Esposito claims, stems from the «more originary» word *munus*, meaning «gift», the gift of nothing, the law of the giving as such. *Munus* is the gift that allows to give a specific meaning, or content, every time to the «empty place» which lies at the core of the

8 D. Tarizzo, *La vita, un'invenzione recente*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2010.

9 R. Esposito, *Pensiero vivente*, cit., p. 265.

10 Ibidem, p. 244.

11 Ibidem, p. 245.

community as its «nothing in common». This gift, Esposito argues, is the reverse of the subjective logic of presupposition. Instead of being presupposed, the subjects of the common are «exposed» to what always dismisses them from their auto-presupposition and places them in a common space. By giving each other nothing, nothing but their being-to-death, the subjects of the common give each other a common existence as well. A common existence, always plural and singular, which cannot be defined by a common substance, but rather by a common nothingness and extraneousness. From this point of view, Esposito's notion of *communitas* is very closed to Deleuze's notion of «nomadic distribution». On the one hand, both concepts refer to something – which is not literally some-thing, i.e. a substance, but no-thing – that always precedes singularities and makes them finite, plural. On the other hand, both concepts refer to something (or nothing) that, in the eyes of the subject, looks inevitably like death, limit, or even nonsense. A champion of this nonsense, according to Deleuze, was Lewis Carroll, an example being: «For the Snark was a Boojum, you see».¹²

From Carroll to Deleuze this nonsensical banter, even though it looks like pure nothing, death per se, must not be conceived as a mere defeat or checkmate that deprives our existence of any sense. For it is, on the contrary, an «empty square» that produces sense and coincides with the positive event of singularities. The nonsense of nomadic distribution means (without meaning, of course) that none can reassemble and rationalize a throw of dice. «Carroll, yes; Camus, no. This is so because, for the philosophy of the absurd, nonsense is what is opposed to sense in a simple relation with it, so that the absurd is always defined by a deficiency of sense and a lack (there is not enough of it...). From the point of view of structure, on the contrary, there is always too much sense: an excess produced and over-produced by nonsense as a lack of itself.»¹³ The Kabbalists used to speak of *Tsimtsum*, a kind of contraction of God within Himself by which He made room for His creatures in the world. In a similar manner, Esposito's *communitas* and Deleuze's nomadic distribution both refer to retraction of nonsense within itself by which it makes room for every sense, for an excess and spread of sense. Until a certain point of his philosophical itinerary, Esposito has been faithful to this idea –whose political performativity must not be too underestimated by virtue of its mere deconstructive or dismissive inspiration.

With the notion of *immunitas* we suddenly enter a new theoretical horizon, which in a sense is the exact «reverse» of the first. We move from a deconstructive approach to a reconstructive approach, the goal being to no

12 G. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, cit., p. 66.

13 *Ibidem*, p. 71.

longer dismiss the subject. Esposito aims now at discovering the secret of its institution. This means to discover the *origin* of the subject, seen as «a result of the immunitarian logic». Indeed, Esposito claims, «not differently from other political categories of modern times, the category of subject is just a logical procedure to preventively protect the being-in-common against the risk of its auto-dissolution».¹⁴ Here is a passage which is not perfectly clear from my point of view. By clarifying its meaning, we will be able to grasp the deep logic of Esposito's theory.

On the one hand, Esposito says, «the idea of subject, not to be presupposed to the constitution of experience, must be conceived as a result of the immunitarian logic». In other words, it must be conceived as the effect of an immunitarian process that produces a subject who is then «closed off from the world of objects and can master itself». This subject dwells always «in an exclusive and excluding circle that protects it against an outside felt as potentially hostile».¹⁵

On the other hand, since *communitas* and *immunitas* are the «reverse» of each other, it is unimportant from where the passage to each other begins. If it begins from *communitas*, then *immunitas* will be its derived effect, along with the joint «derivation» of the subject. If it begins with *immunitas* and its subjective excrement, then *communitas* will be its reverse: the «interruption» of immunitarian protection against the risk of auto-dissolution.

This is the reason why Esposito claims: «The category of immunity takes its meaning only from the the category of community, as much as the latter is recognizable only from the interruption of the former».¹⁶ The precision is of some importance. Only this Derridean *undecidability* about the priority of *communitas* and *immunitas* allows Esposito to avoid the trap of any substantialistic metaphysics. There is no substance on which the whole reality rests, or from which everything stems unidirectionally. This does not imply that a subject be not already there, even though squint-eyed.

I am going to briefly qualify this statement. Let us suppose, as Esposito believes, that one can substitute «the semantics of the subject with the semantics of life»,¹⁷ a substitution obtained by reducing the subject to the mere effect of something, i.e. life, always preceding it. In this case, the subject would be nothing but the epiphenomenal protuberance of life. However, instead of replacing subject by life, following this path we finally produce a straight identification of subject with life. Indeed, what should look for protection against the risk of self-dissolution? If it is not a subject, as Esposito

14 Roberto Esposito, *Pensiero vivente*, cit., p. 246.

15 Ibidem, pp. 246-247.

16 Ibidem, p. 246.

17 Ibidem, p. 251.

says, it would be life, conceived as our being-in-common. Yet, this life would be now forcefully endowed with a special and obscure feeling of itself, with a special and dark will to self-conservation and self-survival –otherwise, why should we speak of its protection against the risk of self-dissolution? This life, therefore, even without any personal identity or figure, would be already a kind of subjectivity. It would be something (difficult to say now: nothing) that already has a special relationship with itself. Put differently, it is perfectly possible to speak of subjectivity without using the lexicon of «person», so as to take over, eventually, the lexicon of «life». In my view, this is one of the main lessons of German Idealism not to be forgotten. The Idealistic *Geist* is impersonal as much as Esposito's impersonal, and exactly in the same way.

There is something more to consider. Let us now emphasize the other side of Esposito's thought, that which follows the path of Derrida's thought. In this case, it is undecidable whether the *communitas* comes first, along with its «dismissing» of the subject, or the *immunitas* comes first, with its «derivation» of the subject. However, in both cases the subject remains literally the subject, the *subjectum* of every operation, i.e. the *suppositum* of the circle *communitas-immunitas*. Even from this point of view, therefore, the subject is already there, before and after its «dismissing», before and after its «derivation». Incidentally, this is what makes truly consistent Esposito's spiral of *communitas-immunitas* with Foucault's spiral of *subjugation-subjectivation*. Indeed, Foucault never claims the social field to be pervaded only by the operators of subjugation, or subjection (*assujettissement*). Rather, he claims every process of subjectivation to be co-extensive to a process of subjugation that makes *partially* illusory the former. In other words, according to Foucault, the process of subjugation does not make *wholly* illusory the process of subjectivation. If it were so, if subjugation were the only operative force in the social field, if the subject were entirely the passive effect of some «apparatuses» continuously producing and displacing the subject, then it would be totally inconsistent for Foucault to speak of his work as «a patient labour giving form to our impatience for liberty».¹⁸ On the contrary, we would eternally be the ventriloquists of something hidden behind us. To call this something «life» would not improve our condition.

In my view, this is most important point. The subject cannot be entirely «derived», and/or «dismissed». Perhaps, we can consider the «person» as a mask, more or less superficial, of the subject. Yet, a completely de-subjectivated space is not really thinkable, even if we insistently look towards what Esposito calls the «impersonal». As soon as the impersonal is thought,

¹⁸ M. Foucault, *What is Enlightenment?*, in *The Foucault Reader* (ed. by Paul Rabinow), Vintage, New York, 1984, p. 50.

a subject is there to think about it. The subject, then, can also dream to be dead, but by dreaming this dream he will reveal it as the signature of his idiomatic, unavailable subjectivity. This means that beyond the third person of the impersonal there is always a «fourth person» of the unavailable through which the subject simply *happens*. This fourth person is an «empty square» according to Deleuze, or an «empty place» according to Esposito, that surfaces the unavailability of the subject for itself –its «haecceity».¹⁹ It is always a subject who *says* «I do not exist», «I am dead», by perfectly mastering his power of enunciation. At the same time, it is a subject who *happens* in the same enunciation, no matter what he is actually saying. Thus, between what is said and what is happening, we face a gap, a void, that makes room to the recursive dislocation of the subject –its «event». That empty square or empty place is structural and unavailable, *hors dispositif*. It is nonsense that gives sense, every sense, by dismantling the language in a plurality of speech acts which always happen outside, in a space unreachable by these very acts. «Nonsense is that which has no sense, and that which, as such and as it enacts the donation of sense, is opposed to the absence of sense. This is what we must understand by “nonsense”. In the final analysis, the importance of structuralism in philosophy, and for all thought, is that it displaces frontiers»²⁰.

Some years ago, Slavoj Žižek wrote a brilliant paper on *The Becoming-Lacanian of Deleuze*.²¹ Something similar could be claimed in regards to Esposito. For sure, neither «life» nor «immanence» can say nor mean the unavailable. Simply because one cannot state nor mean that which is not the meaning of any saying but rather the event of saying it. On the contrary, while no one can say the unavailable, one can always *listen to* it. This is the peculiar dimension of the unavailable, as yet to be explored. The unavailable is another name of the «common», a name that calls into question any property or mastery of it, so as to continually displace the frontiers of the «common». The unavailable «common» is that which always precedes our voices, that which makes them happen by giving them, every time, a volume and a particular depth. It is the condition of possibility, the collective and historical transcendental of the voice as such.

Personally, this is the «common» I share with Esposito. Following this path, instead of that of «life», we might eventually think again of politics. That is, we might eventually re-construct a performative thought of politics based on the listening of the nonsense that opposes each of us with others and with ourselves. Indeed, this is the path towards the «missing people» that happens

19 G. Deleuze, “Réponse à une question sur le sujet” (1988), in G. Deleuze, *Deux régimes de fous*, p. 327.

20 G. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, cit., p. 71.

21 S. Žižek, «Le devenir-lacanian de Deleuze», *Savoirs et clinique* 6 (2005), pp. 177-189.

each time it meets the nonsense of its absence, wherein it has already written its own event –the event of being-in-common, the occurrence of a subject that is built upon its positive unavailability, always individual and collective, plural/singular of a people that has to re-invent itself at every historical turn. According to Deleuze, this is the task of modern political cinema. Perhaps it is still the assignment of modern political theory and practice. Not that «of addressing a people, which is presupposed already there, but of contributing to the invention of a people».²²

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²² G. Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2001, p. 217.