

# BEING SINGULAR PLURAL BOURGEOIS

On Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel*<sup>1</sup>

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An autonomous subject among autonomous subjects, but in fact being nobody in a crowd of nobodies; a free person, feeling deprived of any real freedom; a singular non-person in a plurality of non-persons: this could be a description of the late modern socio-political condition we are in. Nineteenth and twentieth century critics characterised this condition as ‘bourgeois’, a concept supposed to express the alienated situation into which our socio-political situation was fallen. Somehow or other, they all referred to Hegel who, for the first time in modern history, associated this situation directly with the emergence of the ‘bourgeois’ as paradigm for modern sociality. In his eyes, this term named the typically ‘asocial’, alienated form of modern social life.

At least on the level of content, this is what also Jean-Luc Nancy’s “being singular plural” is about. It is *his* term to conceptualise the ‘bourgeois’ condition of current sociality. Nancy’s concept, however, lacks any negative connotation. Although ‘being singular plural’ summarizes the modern bourgeois condition including its negative aspects, Nancy’s concept acknowledges the irreversible as well as the positive character of that condition. The solution for modern society’s alienation lies precisely in its full affirmation, i.e. in an affirmation of the irreversible fact that we *are* “singular plural”. In Nancy’s “being singular plural”, indeed, the word “being” is to be emphasized. To overcome the negative aspects of our modern condition, i.e. of the ‘singular plural’ we are in, we have to *be* this. We have to assume the fact that this ‘singular plural’ characterizes our very being, and that, therefore, authentically being what we are is our only true solution.

All this implies that, “being singular plural” names the problem and its solution at the same time. It is Nancy’s term for the problematic bourgeois condition we are in, *and* it is his term for the solution of and the remedy against that problematic condition. For the only way to handle the bourgeois problems we have to deal with, is affirming the *ontological* aspect of this condition, i.e. assuming the very being of our ‘being singular plural’.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy (1996), *Être singulier pluriel*, Paris: Galilée; (2000), *Being singular plural*, Stanford : Stanford University Press. The first draft of this essay was my contribution to the IPS XV, the 15<sup>th</sup> International Philosophical Seminar, gathering several essays on this Nancy book (Italy, Castelrotto, June 27 till July 6, 2004).

The question I want to raise in this essay is not so much whether this approach of the (bourgeois) problem is correct or not, as whether it goes far enough – or, more exactly, *whether one has to get to the level of being to go far enough*. I will try to show how Nancy's 'ontological' approach (however correct and true it might be) falls victim of a logic of denial. Criticizing the falsification or oblivion of 'being', Nancy risks neglecting the 'reality' of this falsification and oblivion. It seems to me that, in Nancy's thought, "being" is too much a solution, and that, therefore, it makes him blind for the 'reality' of the problems we have to deal with. I agree that we have affirmatively to acknowledge the 'bourgeois' condition in order to overcome its impasses, but the question is whether the affirmation of its 'being' is sufficient enough.

The crucial question here is indeed an ontological one. Although Nancy convincingly refines the Heideggerian ontology, the question is whether even this refined and modified ontology is able to analyse what is really at stake in our bourgeois condition and if it is capable at all to show a way out of it. In a way, it is the question if ontological philosophy as such is still able to do the job? Ontology supposes that, in every question concerning being, the being of the very question contains already the answer. Does this typically philosophical approach, however, shut enough light upon the problems we are in? Must we not, in the name of philosophy, reconsider ontology's position of "first philosophy", as Nancy<sup>2</sup> like so many others put it?

I will first go into modernity's 'bourgeois' condition and, then, put Nancy's 'affirmative' approach of this question within the context of a few other 'affirmative' approaches. Further, I will show how Nancy's "being singular plural" is, if not a solution, at least an answer to this problematic condition. This will finally allow me to elaborate the critical remarks I just mentioned.

## 1. Bourgeois

Hegel was the first to elaborate the paradox of the bourgeois in a strictly philosophical way. The context in which he did this, the *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*<sup>3</sup>, is not directly ontological, but ethical. In Hegel's thought, however, ontological and ethical are finally united in their very difference. In his philosophy of law, 'Bürger' or 'bourgeois' is indeed an

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<sup>2</sup> Nancy 1996: 46.

<sup>3</sup> More exactly in the third part ("Die Sittlichkeit", "The Ethical System"), second section ("Die bürgerliche Gesellschaft", "Civic Community": §182-256).

ethical category. It is the ethical figure, which has overcome purely individual “morality” (“Moralität”)<sup>4</sup> that ended up in the impasse of the “beautiful soul” (“schöne Seele”)<sup>5</sup>. Doing well is not a personal affair concerning only my own consciousness (as Kant thought), but a social affair concerning the real state of things: it is an affair of effectively realising the good for me as well as for others.

This is what happens in the ethical figure of the family (*Familie*). Here, each family member acts immediately in favour of all other members. A father, for instance, acts in favour of his wife and children with the same passion as he acts in favour of himself. The ‘locus’ of the good he does is no longer *only* his inner consciousness (as in Kantian morals); it is *also* the real world outside, i.e. his family as concrete ethical reality. However, once passed the boundaries of his home and family, he behaves in a radically different way. There, in the outside world, he acts like a “bourgeois”. Ready to sacrifice himself for others at home, in public space, he does not recoil from sacrificing others for his own sake. The ‘warm’, ‘inner’ family relationship has now been changed for a ‘cold’, ‘external’ ‘business’ relationship. People are only there to make ‘use’ of or to exploit – as slave, servant, trading partner, client, consumer or whatever. Whereas within the circle of his family, everything is really ethical (ethics, there, has become a *real* thing, a form of doing *really* good), outside of it, there is only room for ‘hard business’. There, a real absence of ethics seems to reign.

No wonder that, in spite of his criticism, Marx was so inspired by Hegel: the core of Marxist critique of capitalistic – bourgeois – society is already in Hegel. All social aberrations of 19<sup>th</sup> century society, the analysis of proletarian poverty as a direct result of the bourgeois society itself, or the idea that the ‘hunger’ in the world is not a fate, but a product of this kind of society: it is all already in Hegel’s description of the absence of ethics being the hallmark of modern bourgeois society. And it was Hegel, too, who discovered the structural cause of all this misery: we have replaced the real thing by its negation, i.e. by its *representation*. We made a fetish of it, as Marx analysed in one of the core chapters in his *Capital*.<sup>6</sup> Having all become bourgeois (i.e. capitalistic consumers), we seem to be definitively alienated into a mirror-world full of fetishes, for ever separated from our real and authentic way of being. This is still the main topic we have to reflect upon, so Nancy, too, claims in *L’être singulier pluriel*:

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<sup>4</sup> Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, § 105-141.

<sup>5</sup> G.W.F. Hegel (1970), *Werke in zwanzig Bänden, 3: Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, p. 464 ff.

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If we now have to think about social Being in some other way than according to its spectacular-market self-mockery or its communicational self-assurance, both of which take place on the basis of an unlikely and nostalgic inauthenticity, it is quite likely that there would be nothing else for us to meditate on, nothing to ruminate about or mull over between us. (Nancy 2000: 62; 1996: 84-85)

A bourgeois society having lost any authentic or ethical ground: this is what (like already Hegel) we have to meditate on.

Yet, it is Hegel's genius to consider this absence of ethics as a fully ethical moment – or, even, as the highest ethical moment of his time. Underneath this negation of ethics, the “force of the negative” is still at work. For according to Hegel, reality *is* its own negation. The power supporting reality is the “power of the negative”. The “civic community” might be an ethical disaster, a community without any sense for community or a society based upon everyone's non-sociality; it is nonetheless this very negativity that must be affirmed, for this is the only way this negativity can ‘sublate’ itself into a fully self-conscious and positive reality. The notion of sublation (*Aufhebung*) allows Hegel to affirm the most negative side of the problem he faces, for only there, one can find a way out.

This is, at least formally, the way also Jean-Luc Nancy faces the problem of bourgeois society. His solution, too, consists in the *affirmation* of the problem as such. To enlighten, now, the specificity of Nancy's affirmative approach, it is necessary to first remember some previous attempts in philosophy's history that faced its problems in similarly *affirmative* way.

## 2. Thinking Affirmatively

‘The solution of the problem lies in the problem itself’: from Parmenides onwards, this has always been one of philosophy's favourite procedures. In a way, it coincides with the invention of western thought as such. For, where else locating its starting point than in the supposition that the answer of a question is lying in the very being of this question? To ask ‘what is a tree?’ names already – in the word ‘is’ – the being of that tree, its essence, its *real* support – which, thus, is the answer to the question. Every question questions being, and is at the same time supposed to be itself a being. Asking whether there is something rather than nothing supposes at least the being of this very question. Asking for the sense of being names already the answer saying that sense is nothing else than being itself. The very being of a question contains already its answer. Only, this is what thought normally overlooks and

denies. So, it is up to philosophy to take a step back and to affirm the being already supposed by the question.

Hegel's philosophy is the illustration par excellence of this affirmative way of thinking. Every question concerning being tells about it; and telling it is impossible without representing it. Yet, a representation of being implies its negation. What Hegel has seen is the 'simple' fact that a question – and, thus, a representation as well as a negation – *is*; it is itself being. Negating being is itself being. That is why questioning being, precisely by taking a distance towards it, in fact affirms being as such. For the negation and the distance at work in the question are equal to the negation and the distance at work in being as such. They are being's very essence. Taking distance from being – which is the condition sine qua non of thought and of consciousness in general – is the proper movement of being itself. That is why consciousness is not only about being, but is being's own movement. It makes self-consciousness to be the hallmark of being itself, thus Hegel.

Martin Heidegger delivered one of the decisive corrections of this Hegelian insight. Of course, it is all about 'being *as such*', i.e. about the distance of being towards itself, assignable already in every question. Only, the place where this 'as such' or distance is to be located is not self-consciousness, as Hegel thought. It is not the passive receptivity of a speculative reflection – of a speculation reflecting being's own 'speculations'. It is rather an active creation by imagination; it is the work of a creative '*Einbildungskraft*', which has its locus in concrete everyday life rather than in an abstract speculative self-consciousness. What coincides with the distance between being and itself is human existence in all his aspects. Not only his self-consciousness, but his concrete, every day life existence, his "geworfener Entwurf".<sup>7</sup> We, humans, *have* no project, we *are* a project, which is to say that we are the distance between what we are and what we imagine we should be. That is why we can ask what things are 'as such'. It is in this very question that being 'as such' occurs. That is why we are to be defined as 'Dasein', as the locus where 'Sein' 'da' is, where being takes place.

Here, Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy is to be introduced as an attempt to rectify for his part the Heideggerian correction of Hegel. Being *as such*, as it meets itself in the difference with itself, is not to be found in an individual *Dasein*, as Heidegger emphasizes, but in *Mitsein*, according to Nancy one of the underestimated concepts in *Sein und Zeit*. Facing the bourgeois problem we are in, we have to affirm it in its ontological dimension, in its very being as such. Only, so Nancy claims, this being as such is to be found, not in our personal

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<sup>7</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §31.

Dasein, but in our *Mitsein*, in the fact that we are with one another – this is to say that our very being is founded only in the fact that we are with one another as well as with the world we are living in. That is why, according to Nancy, we have to rethink the ‘we’ we are. After all, we are forced to this by current mondialisation. The bourgeois condition, becoming the condition of the entire planet, forces us to rethink who ‘we’ are, now we have all become master of the entire world. ‘We’ is the place where “*Sein da ist*”, the place where being occurs. It is preceding from this insight that we have to rethink the ‘we’ as well as being ‘as such’ as *Mitsein*. This is why philosophy, ontology as well as thought in general are inherently socio-political. The socio-political is not one of their dimensions; it is their very ‘essence’.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Being Singular Plural

Affirming the bourgeois problem in its being ‘as such’ needs an affirmative rethinking of the Heideggerian notion of ‘*Mitsein*’. The most appropriate locus to capture being ‘as such’ is the fact no being is without another being. This is to capture, not in the ‘da’ of our personal Dasein (as Heidegger claims), but in the space of this ‘not without’. The space of the ‘with’ in *Mitsein* is the locus where one can affirm being as such. It is not the space *as such*, the space thought as an entity on its own, but the space as what makes a singular being to be open to the plurality of other singular beings. This kind of space ‘between’ deprives beings from their supposed individuality, and forces us to think them *as primarily plural*. They do not belong to a totality they are supposed to be part of. They are singular elements of a plurality that lacks totality. They are indeed *singular*, and not *particular*, i.e. not a *part* of a whole; not defined by an essence they are supposed to have in common with this whole. Being consists only of *singular* beings hold together, not by any common essence or sense, but by the very distance separating them and making them being *with* one another. It is the kind of space between them that gives each singular being the chance to be open towards other beings, to be *with* them or, which amounts to the same thing, simply to *be*.

Being is not a substance resting in itself, but *openness* of singular beings towards other singular beings. This is why every singular being is the “origin” of the world, i.e. the point from where being becomes a world full of sense. No one can pretend to be the master of the world, but everyone (and even every thing) is open to the world from a singular and

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<sup>8</sup> Referentie????

absolutely original point. This point can only be ‘touched’ in the touch of others, i.e. where, in meeting others (including other things), one touches his own openness to the other and the other’s openness to him.<sup>9</sup> This is, however, not to say that he can appropriate this point. He cannot make it a part of his own, he can only partake in it together with others.<sup>10</sup> It is a point he can only share with others. This point is the ‘core’ of his being, which is basically being-with (*être avec, Mitsein*). He can only touch that point, to feel that, in this very touch, it at the same time withdraws.

All of being is in touch with all of being, but the law of touching is separation. [...] From one to the other is the syncopated repetition of origins-of-the-world, which are each time one or the other. The origin is affirmation ... [Nancy 2000: 5-6; 1996: 23-24]

Because the “origin” can never be appropriated, it only exists in the act of its affirmation. And for the same reason, this affirmation must be, again and again, renewed. This is to say that the origin we ‘are’ exists only in its repetitive communication with others: it exists only “with”.

The passage I quote continues as follows:

The origin is affirmation; repetition is the condition of affirmation. I say “that is, that it is” [*je dis: «cela est, que cela soit»*] It is not a “fact” and has nothing to do with any sort of evaluation. It is a singularity taking refuge in its affirmation of Being, a touch of meaning [*une touche de sens*]. [Ibidem]

In its singularity, a being only exists in its openness to other beings, in its communication. Communication is not communication *of* what exists (this is what representational logic claims): communication is the very way being is, it is its ‘essence’ – which is to say that there is no substantial essence, i.e. that being is being exposed to – and communication with – other beings. That is why there is no ‘being in general’, but only singular beings, constituting an open plurality rather than a closed totality. In other words, being is singular plural.

[...] the singular-plural constitutes the essence of Being, a constitution that undoes or dislocates every single, substantial essence of Being itself. This is not just a way of speaking, because there is no prior substance that would be dissolved. Being does not pre-exist its singular plural. To be more precise, Being absolutely does not pre-exist; nothing pre-exists, only what exists exists. [Nancy 2000: 28-29; 1996: 48]

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<sup>9</sup> The topic of the ‘touch’ (le toucher) is a main topic in Nancy. See for instance Nancy (2003), *Noli me tangere*, Paris: Bayard. In his book on Nancy, Derrida takes the touch as his guiding issue: Jacques Derrida, *Le touché, Jean-Luc Nancy*, Paris: Galilée.

<sup>10</sup> This is what Nancy elaborates with his notion of “partage”, already the main topic of one of his early books: *Partage des voix*.

Or, to mention another of Nancy's concepts: being is 'displacement' and, more exactly, 'spacing' (*espacement*). The space between the singular plural beings, the space that makes them being *with* each other, is not a stable space, not the Newtonian space or space as a transcendental condition. The space 'between' "undoes and dislocates every single, substantial essence". It is the "spacing" qualifying being as such:

Being is at the same time in the same place only on the condition of the spacing [*l'espacement*] of an indefinite plurality of singularities. Being is with Being; it does not ever cover itself, but it is near to itself, beside itself, in touch with itself, its very self [*à même soi*], in the paradox of proximity where distancing [*éloignement*] and strangeness are revealed. [Nancy 2000: 35; 1996: 55]

The "spacing" of being – i.e. the space where being takes place, where '*Sein da ist*' – is not the individual *Dasein*, but the 'da' where the singular *Daseins* are *with* other *Daseins* and with other beings. This is Nancy's 'displacement' of Heidegger's *Daseinsanalytik* in *Sein und Zeit*. Instead of the individual being, the 'being-with' is the proper locus of philosophy and thought. The community – the 'city', the 'polis', the fact that we are with one another – is not one of thought's privileged topics, it is the very place where thought takes place. It is never I who is thinking, nor is it 'we' as a closed community: it is 'we' as our being-with one another, 'we' as our being in common. So,

philosophy begins with and in "civil" ["*concitoyenne*"] coexistence as such (which, in its very difference from the "imperial" form, forces power to emerge as a problem). Or rather, the "city" is not primarily a form of political institution; it is primarily being-with *as such*. (Nancy 2000: 31; 1996: 51; Nancy underlines)

This is Nancy's way to save a *Daseinsanalytik* from the blindness Heidegger showed in his incapacity to think the political and forced him to approve the fascist politics of his time.

But Nancy does not remain within the limits of a '*Daseinsanalytik*'; he does not only approach Being from the point of human *Dasein*, but also directly from non-human things, from what Heidegger would call "*zuhandene seinden*". His ontology is not only a strictly Heideggerian one. He seems at the same time leaning towards ontology in the classical 'metaphysical' sense of the word. Being is 'being-with' for every being, whatever it is. Beings are singular things next to other, somewhat like the Leibnizian monads. Next to a few explicit references in Nancy essay (Nancy 1996: 59, 73; 2000: 39, 52), there are several implicit allusions. For instance, sentences like these:

If the world does not “have” an origin “outside of itself”, if the world is its own origin or the origin “itself”, than the origin of the world occurs at each moment of the world. It is the *each time* of Being, and its realm is the *being with* of each time with every [other] time. (Nancy 2000: 83; 1996: 106)

This sentence does not only refer to a (Heideggerian) Dasein, but to non-human beings as well, and could be read as a description of the Leibnizian monadic universe. It describes being as a “dissemination of the world’s origin” (Nancy 2000: 83; 1996: 107). The condition of ‘being-with’, deconstructing the idea of one substantial origin, makes every singular being to an origin of the world. Explicitly or implicitly, Nancy refers to Leibniz to stress the materialism of his concept of ‘being-with’. Ontology – or more exactly co-ontology<sup>11</sup> – is radically materialistic, it is a co-ontology of bodies. Human and non-human beings are to be thought as bodies being exposed to other bodies. “The ontology of being-with is an ontology of bodies”, Nancy writes (Nancy 2000: 84; 1996: 107).

This is why Nancy refers also to Gilles Deleuze, whose ontology is another non-Heideggerian and radically materialistic way to think the “originary division” of being (ibidem). The deleuzian ‘rhizomatic’ universe of purely external and material forces is, according to Nancy, a way to express what he himself means by ‘being-with’. Mentioning Deleuze only once explicitly in *Être singulier pluriel*, he implicitly refers to him when he explains the materiality of language.<sup>12</sup> In *The logic of the Sense*, Deleuze uses the tools of Stoic logic, and more precisely the notion of the ‘incorporeal’, to express the materiality of language.<sup>13</sup> Language is not the immaterial representation of material things; it is itself entirely the effect of the corporeal. For, ‘incorporeal’ does not mean the negative of corporeal, but an effect of – and *within* – the corporeal world. Language is, instead of being a representation and, thus, a negation of corporeal things, their incorporeal product. It is not the irruption of the Other (as, for instance, Lévi-Strauss and Lacan would claim), it is being’s exposure to the world. This is to say, it is the “exteriority” of the world, which Nancy interprets as a form of the world’s most basic condition: its being-with:

Language is the incorporeal (as the Stoics said). [...] It is the whole of the outside of the world; it is not the eruption of an Other, which would clear away or sublimate the world, which would transcribe it into

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<sup>11</sup> Nancy 1996: 63; 2000: 42.

<sup>12</sup> For Nancy’s more detailed ‘*Auseinandersetzung*’ with Deleuze, see his article “Pli deleuzienne de la pensée”, in: Eric Alliez (éd.) (1998), *Gilles Deleuze: une vie philosophique*, Paris : Synthélabo, p. 115-123.

<sup>13</sup> See especially the “series” on language in *The logic of the sense*: Gilles Deleuze (1969), *La logique du sens*, Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, p. 212-216. Deleuze’s reference for his use of the stoic logic (and the notion of the corporeal) is: Émile Bréhier (1928), *La Théorie des incorporels dans l’ancien stoïcisme*, Paris: Vrin.

something else: instead, it is the exposition of the world of bodies as such, that is, as originally singular plural. The incorporeal exposes bodies according to their being-with-one-another; they are neither isolated nor mixed together. They are *amongst themselves* [*entre eux*], as origins. (Nancy 2000: 84; 1996: 108)

Just like “spacing”, language “undoes or dislocates every single, substantial essence of Being itself”; it opens them to their ‘essence’ as to what exposes them to other beings, i.e. as what makes them being-with.

#### 4. Banality: the Royal Way to Being-with

When or how, then, can we get in touch with being ‘as such’, i.e. with being-with – for this is the only helpful way to face the bourgeois condition we are in? Not by looking into the interior kernel of things, into their essence in the classical (substantial) sense of the word. We must at least proceed, in an affirmative way, from the banality of everyday life, from the “*Alltäglichkeit*” as already Heidegger *Daseinsanalytik* emphasized.<sup>14</sup> According to Heidegger, however, everyday life mentality (‘*das Man*’ for instance) must be analysed as a form of ‘fallness’ (‘*Verfallenheit*’): one has to overcome it by *assuming* it, and, in the moment of “*Entschlossenheit*”, by turning it into an authentic existence. Nancy, on the contrary, supposes being ‘as such’ to be touched precisely in the superficiality and the inauthenticity of everyday life phenomena.

It is not enough, then, to set idle chatter in opposition to the authenticity of the spoken word, understood as being replete with meaning [parole pleine de sens]. On the contrary, it is necessary to discern the conversation (and sustaining) of being-with as such within chatter: it is in “conversing” [*c’est en s’«entretenant»*], in the sense of discussion, that being-with “sustains itself”, in the sense of perseverance of Being. (Nancy 2000: 87; 1996 : 110-111)

The importance of the superficial and the inauthentic can also be illustrated with Nancy’s analysis of curiosity. This, too, is a Heideggerian concept, naming *Dasein*’s superficial, too easily satisfied hunger for knowledge. Or, in Nancy’s words evoking Heidegger’s description: “curiosity is the frantic activity of passing from being to being in an insatiable sort of way,

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<sup>14</sup> “Thus, the spontaneous knowledge of society – its “preontological comprehension” of itself – is knowledge about Being itself, absolutely, and not about the particular and subordinate region of beings, which would be the ‘social’ region of Being. Being-with is constitutive of Being, and it is [constitutive] for the totality of being [...]; ‘social’ co-appearance is itself exposing of the general co-appearance of beings. This insight makes its way from Rousseau to Bataille, or from Marx to Heidegger, and it requires that we find a language that is *ours*.” (Nancy 2000: 70; 1996: 93, Nancy underlines).

without ever being able to stop and think” (Nancy 2000: 19; 1996: 38). According to Nancy himself, however, curiosity, precisely in its all too superficial interest in the world, opens to its ‘origin’, i.e. to the ‘spacing’ of *being-with-the-others*. The inauthentic interest of the “*Neugier*” affirms somehow that a thing’s or a human being’s core is not to be situated in its kernel, but outside of it, in its superficial openness to other things, to other human beings.

It is necessary, then, to disconnect the most primitive layer of curiosity, the level on which we are primarily interested by what is interesting par excellence (the origin), from this inconsistent curiosity and also from the attention that takes care of others (*Fürsorge*). At this level, we are interested in the sense of being intrigued by the ever-renewed alterity of the origin and, if I may say so, in the sense of having an affaire with it. . (Nancy 2000: 20; 1996: 38-39)

Emphasizing the ‘origin’, Nancy criticizes those who rightly claim that human being is basic openness, but who define this openness, not to the ‘origin’, but to a radical *otherness* – in other words, that the core of our preoccupations is not something ‘original’, but something radically Other. Although Nancy’s ‘origin’ is certainly largely characterized by this kind of alterity (when touched, it is already withdrawn; it resists appropriation; it cannot be totalised, and so on), he refuses the word ‘other’, in order to stress the radically ‘innerworldly character’ (*Innerweltlichkeit*)<sup>15</sup> of what is at stake in it. He refuses to define our ontological condition – i.e. the untouchable that haunts us, or the impossible displacement that makes things taking place – as an alterity, because in this case it gets either divinised or diabolised. This is to say that, then, it is supposed to belong to an ‘outside’ with which we think we can negotiate and set up some ‘commerce’. This is what, for instance, religion does. Precisely the connection with religion reveals the danger hidden in such kind of commerce with a supposed outside: one can get seduced to sacrifice to it – or even offer *human* sacrifices to it. This is why, according to Nancy, the logic of Otherness goes hand in hand with the logic of sacrifice.<sup>16</sup> If we do not approach the other as an singular plural ‘origin’ of the world, if we approach him as an alterity encouraging our desire, then

[w]e no longer look for a singularity of the origin of the other ; we look for the unique and exclusive origin, in order to either adopt it or reject it. The other becomes the Other according to the mode of desire or hatred. Making the other divine (together with our voluntary servitude) or making it evil

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<sup>15</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §15-18.

<sup>16</sup> See “Existence insacrifiable”, in: ????. This is the core of his criticism against Bataille. He agrees his idea that human being is an excessive exposure to the outside, but he refuses to locate the ‘outside’ outside the world. The world itself is outside, and his notion of being-with is an attempt to elaborate this idea.

(together with its exclusion or extermination) is that part of curiosity no longer interested in dis-position and co-appearance, but rather has become the desire for the Position itself. (Nancy 2000: 20; 1996: 39)

In short, to think the bourgeois condition we are in, Nancy stresses the necessity of a radical ‘innerworldly’ thought, not referring to the Other or different forms of alterity, but to the banality of everyday life phenomena, i.e. to phenomena and attitudes Heidegger characterized as “*verfallen*” (“fallenness”). Only those ‘fallen’, inauthentic phenomena, affirmed as such, lead to the authenticity of being-with.

## 5. Affirming banality

Yet, what does this mean: affirming the fallen banality or the inauthentic? What does it mean not to consider as alienated the phenomena in which we so often feel alienated? What does it mean not to consider as Other the world in which we feel lost? For, this is how two of the major theories of twenty century thought has defined the bourgeois shape we are in. Marxism has defined the capitalist world we live in as a world of commodity fetishism alienating us from our essence, which is labour. Psychoanalysis (in its Freudian and, even more clearly, its Lacanian version) has defined the world, with which we are in a relation of structural discontent<sup>17</sup>, as the ‘Other’ – other than the world of satisfaction we dream of.

The core of Nancy’s comments on both kinds of thought is that they get both stuck into representational logic, supposing an alternative beyond the problematic ‘alienating’ situation. This is the way they neglect what is right under their eyes, i.e. the *being* of those phenomena, the fact that already their existence testifies of the *Mitsein*, the being-with they are. Recognizing this being is basically the solution to the problematic situation. “What Marx understood by alienation [...] is primarily an alienation of sense [*aliénation de sens*]”, i.e. of being-with (Nancy, 2000: 42; 1996: 62; modified translation, MdK). And this “sense” is no longer to be thought in terms of alienation logic. According to Nancy, Marx theory anticipates a “co-ontology” (Nancy, 2000: 42; 1996: 63).

The same way, Freud – certainly the Freud of the second ‘*Topik*’ introducing, in *Das Ich und das Es*, a more elaborated theory of the I (in fact a theory build upon a narcissistic split in the I, picked up by Lacan, as Nancy mentions himself) – contains a critique upon the “ipsology”, so present in the philosophy of his time (Nancy 2000: 65; 44-45). In fact, Freud’s psychoanalysis can be read as a theory of “co-ipseity” [“co-ipséité”], announcing Nancy’s

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<sup>17</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (.....), *Civilisation and its discontent*,

own co-ontology (ibidem). In short, between social Marxism and individual Freudism, lies a space where both can find each other. Or, more exactly, it is precisely the space of the ‘in between’, of the being-with: “the bare space of «being-together»” (ibidem). We ‘only’ have to acknowledge what is ‘barely’ underneath our eyes.

The logic of “stripping bare”, of “exposing”, or, more precisely, the logic of what Heidegger calls the “unconcealing”, “*die Entbergung*”: this is the logic Nancy promotes as the alternative for the representational logic.<sup>18</sup> The being-with is not the other side of the ‘alienating’ phenomena; it is to be found in their very phenomenality itself, in the way they appear seemingly alienated, next to each other: together only in the superficiality of their being singular plural. In other words, the being-with is to be found in – what Nancy calls – their “*comparution*”: “co-appearance”.<sup>19</sup>

Here, we might probably face the most problematic part of Nancy’s thought. For this “co-appearance” being the object *and* the outcome of his “*entbergende*” analysis is not without paradoxical, if not to say self-destructing implications.

Take for instance the question of capitalism – to keep to the issue of the bourgeois condition. Surely, Nancy does not belong to its defenders, on the contrary. But his criticism does not propose an alternative either. For, according to him, this was precisely the mistake Soviet Communism made: pretending to represent its alternative, it trapped into the logic of the Other and, thus, in the logic of sacrifice (with its apotheosis in the Gulag-terror). In order to fight capitalism, one should affirm it in its very *being*, i.e. in the fact that, right in its hiding façade, it exposes what it is: being-with. Despite of being perceived as alienating commodity fetishism, it shows the “co-appearance” that we *are*.

This, however, implies that the exposed “co-appearance” hidden in capitalism shows indeed nothing other than capitalism. Capitalism’s “*Entbergung*” does not show us something other: it makes us face capitalism in its being; not in some ‘deeper’ and more essential dimension, but in its radically superficial plurality of singular beings, in the realm of plural singular commodities deconstructing the idea we are free and autonomous subjects/consumers. The “reverse side” of capitalism is not something other than capitalism, but capitalism seen from another angle, more precisely an ontological one. The fetish commodities, not unlike their consumers, existing indifferently next to each other, remain indifferently next to each other even after the operation of “unconcealment” (“*Entbergung*”).

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger (1962), *Die Technik und die Kehre*, Pfullingen: Verlag Gunther Neske.

<sup>19</sup> Nancy elaborates this concept for the first time in: Jean-Luc Nancy & Jean-Christophe Bailly (1991), *La comparution (politique à venir)*, Paris: Christian Bourgeois Éditeur.

They are only affirmatively acknowledged in there being, i.e. in their being-with, in their being-with-one-another.

The bare exposition of co-appearance is the exposition of capital. Capital is something like the reverse side of co-appearance *and* that which reveals co-appearance. Capital's violent inhumanity displays [*étale*] nothing other than the simultaneity of the singular (but the singular posing as the indifferent and interchangeable particularity of the unit of production) and the plural (itself posing as the system of commodity circulation). [...] One could say that capital is the alienation of being singular plural as such. This would be quite accurate so long as one did not understand being singular plural as a primitive, authentic subject, a subject to which capital happened as its other and purely by accident. (Nothing would be more foreign to Marxist thinking.) Capital is the "alienation" of Being in its being-social to the extent that it puts this being in play as such. It is not the negative dialectic of some prior community that occurs within a continuous historical process; instead, it exposes a singular plural constitution or configuration that is neither the "community" nor the "individual". Incalculable "surplus-value" – "value" as indefinite, circulatory, and autotelic growth – exposes the inaccessibility of a primordial or final "value". In a paradoxical and violent way, it immediately poses the question of an "outside-value" or "absolute value" – which would be immeasurable, priceless (what Kant called a "dignity"). (Nancy 2000: 73-74; 1996: 95)

'Being singular plural bourgeois': in Nancy, it is criticized in its rudely capitalistic version. Yet, the critical operation consists in radically affirming this version. The core concept of Marxist criticism, the "surplus-value", which according to Marx makes any real – sovereign – freedom impossible, is affirmed as being freedom's and sovereignty's principle. It is capitalism's "*Würdigkeit*". And, what is more, it is the sovereign "dignity" of modern society in general. What divided us in atomic, singular plural bourgeois, deprived from any personal "*Würdigkeit*", ends up to be our only real dignity, the dignity of what we *are*, the dignity founded in being's dignity, i.e. in the fact that we *are* singular plural.

We are singular plural bourgeois. As bourgeois, we have always complained precisely of being singular plural, i.e. of being no real individuals, persons, subjects. This is why, during the twentieth century, with its apotheosis in the May 68 period, 'bourgeois' became a critical and highly negative term, referring to our incapacity of being free individual subjects. It is this kind of 'humanistic' criticism that Nancy criticizes. The May 68 generation was wrong in its critique of the bourgeois, for that was what they were. And they were especially wrong in not ontologically approving this. That is why this revolution is important, if only to take over its task to establish an affirmative approach of our being singular plural bourgeois, i.e. of our being-with. We have lost any real sense for community, we are dispersed as non-

persons in a plurality of non-persons, we are no-ones in a world of no-ones. Sure, but this is nothing else than the appearance of our very being, of our being-with. This *co-appearance* is our being-with.

Here, Nancy touches a paradox that threatens in a way his entire ontological approach. For what does co-appearance mean if it appears to be the same as any normal appearance? What, then, can be the result of ‘unconcealing’ appearance as co-appearance? Reflecting on capitalism, Nancy writes:

It must be said, however, that co-appearance might only be another name for capital. At the same time, it might be a name that runs the risk of once again masking what is at-issue, providing a consoling way of thinking that is secretly resigned. (Nancy 2000: 63; 1996: 85)

Indeed, it runs the risk infecting the core of his entire affirmative, ontological approach. For what is an ‘affirmative’ analysis worth if it can too easily let the analysed problem simply undisturbed. And here, as is so often the case in his writings, Nancy chose the ‘negative’ way to counter the problem: instead of giving a *right* solution to the raised problem, he only presents a few *wrong* solutions. He explains ‘how it is not’, without explaining how, in that specific case, his notion of being-with can really make the difference. The passage just quoted continues as follows:

But this danger is not a sufficient reason to be satisfied with a critique of capital that is still held prisoner to the presupposition of an “other subject” of history, economics, and the appropriation of the proper in general. In pointing to “capital”, Marx designated a general deappropriation [*déappropriation*] that does not allow for the presupposition of preservation of the other, or the Other, which would be the subject of the general reappropriation. (Nancy 2000: 63-64; 1996: 85-86)

So, to summarize the argument, co-appearance might just equal capitalism – in other words, the result of an ontological analysis might simply equal the analysed problem – and nevertheless, the ontological approach must be conserved, if only because another approach, more precisely the approach of the problem as Other, is even worse.

## 6. Retreat

Yet, how to avoid the deadlock of an affirmative, ontological approach without, in one way or another, referring to some ‘otherness’, to something that is to be removed as a false image of

the right way, i.e. as ‘other’ than the right, ontological approach? How to overcome definitively any logic of otherness and, thus, representation?

Here, Nancy’s notion of “retrait” must be mentioned. Affirmatively thinking the ontological condition of politics, for instance, is only possible in the context of what Nancy calls “the retreat of the political and the religious [what, according to him, goes hand in hand]”.<sup>20</sup> To think ontologically the community is impossible if we keep thinking it as a substantial community, as a “figure”, or as a community evolving in the direction of an other type (“form” or “figure”) of community.

The retreat of the political and the religious, or of the theologico-political, means the retreat of every space, form, or screen into which or onto which a figure of community could be projected. At the right time, then, the question has to be posed as to whether being-together can do without figure and, as a result, without any identification, if the whole of its “substance” consists only in its spacing. (Nancy, 2000: 47; 1996: 67)

Affirmatively thinking society’s being – i.e. its being-with – is only possible in a retreat of all “figures” representing the community, or the political in general. In fact, it is the retreat of representation. Which can be a quite difficult thing to realise in a world as ours, full of representations and “spectacles” – to refer to Guy Debord’s “society of the spectacle”, largely discussed in *Être singulier pluriel*). But Nancy, nonetheless, sticks to the idea that only in a “retreat” of representational logic, society’s ontological base, its being-with, can be discovered and affirmed.

But what does “retreat” mean here? Are all spectacles and representations to be dropped? Must we give up our entire visual culture? This is, of course, not what Nancy has in mind. For, in that case, he, too, would fall into the trap of representational logic, which is a ‘logic of the Other’. Spectacles should not be approached as spectacles, i.e. as false representations referring to a true reality outside, to a non-seen ‘Other’. There is no outside; there is no Other, so Nancy emphasizes again and again. There is only being ‘as such’, being-with. This is precisely the mistake a ‘society of the spectacle’ as well as its critics make: they reduce society’s ‘being-with’ to a ‘specular’ game, supposing that it can find its true self

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<sup>20</sup> Nancy elaborated this issue for the first time, in collaboration with, among others, Jean-François Lyotard and Claude Lefort, in his work for the ‘*Centre de recherches philosophiques sur le politique*’, resulting in *Rejouer le politique* (1981) and *Le retrait du politique*, (1983) Paris: Galilée \*\*\*\*\*

in the mirrors in which it represents itself.<sup>21</sup> It reduces itself to a mirror effect, sacrificing to a false Other its real being – its real ‘self’, i.e. its being with. Thus, our “society of spectacles” as well as the spectacles as such, must be approached, not as being’s representation, but a being ‘as such’, as *being-with*. In society’s spectacles and representations, *being-with* is retreated; that is why, it is now up to these representations to retreat. Being-with, which is concealed in the spectacles, is now to be unconcealed by a retreat of those spectacles.

Yet, again, what can such a retreat mean? Are we not locked up here in a similar deadlock as the one before? Does a retreat of the spectacle not coincide with a very maintenance of that spectacle? Does the affirmation of representation’s being really make an end to what Nancy criticizes as representational operation? At the end of his long discussion with Debord on the “society of the spectacle”, Nancy puts a few questions forward, of which the last asks:

if the “spectacle” is, in one way or another, a constitutive dimension of society? [...] if what is called “social relation” can be thought of according to something other than the symbolic order, and if the symbolic order can, in turn, be thought of in some way other than according to the order of “imagination” or “figuration”, all of which indicates the necessity of thinking all these terms in a new way? (Nancy 200: 54-55; 1996: 76)

Nancy’s question is not necessarily rhetorical. In the lines preceding this quote, in a long comment on Debord, he has already explained how wrong a representational logic is in order to analyse social reality; how “critique absolutely needs to rest on some principle other than that of the ontology of the Other and the Same [which is an implication of representational logic]” (Nancy 2000: 53; 1996: 74). So, spectacles, representations and representational logic should retreat. Nevertheless, after having already ‘answered’ the question, in the passage just quoted, Nancy retakes it *as question*. Maybe the spectacle is indispensable for society, not in its concealed quality of being, but in its ‘imaginary’ quality, as “imagination”, as “figuration”. If this is the case, it questions the core of Nancy’s ontological approach.

However, this is how, at least, it seems. It seems as if Nancy ends up here with a real question. Yet, as he writes a few lines further, this question is “programmatically”, in fact, all too programmatically to be a real question, questioning Nancy’s own thought. It is as programmatically as the quotation marks accompanying “imagination” and “figuration”, turning them into

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<sup>21</sup> “Being together is defined by being-together-at-the-spectacle, and this being-together understands itself as an inversion of the representation of itself, which it believes to be capable of giving itself as originary (and lost) [...]” (Nancy 2000: 51; 1996: 72)

ontological concepts. The question as well as the quotation marks bring about – or, at least, announce – the retreat of “figuration” or other forms of the imaginary. They bring about the transformation of the “spectacle” (i.e. the order of representation, the ‘symbolic order’ in the Lévi-Straussian and Lacanian sense of the word) into an *ontological* symbolic reality, i.e. into something that ‘takes together’ and realises *being-with*. For this is how Nancy defines the ontological meaning of the word ‘symbol’, referring to its etymological origin, which is the Greek word ‘*sun-ballein*’: bringing together, being together, and, in this sense, being-with (Nancy 200: 57-58; 1997: 79).

Here, again, we meet the same paradox as before. The co-ontological approach of the problem – i.e. the affirmation of its being-with – gets almost immediately stuck leaving the problem untouched. To put it in a paradoxical way: in order to say that, in modern society, spectacle and figuration should retreat, Nancy claims that society is impossible without “spectacle”, without “figuration”. And if, in the passage I quoted, this was not his *claim* but his *question*, his ontological logic makes it amount to the same thing. His affirmative approach of the problem runs the risk of leaving the problem untouched. Again, we face the same deadlock.

## 7. Ontology?

What if society really is impossible without representation, spectacle, and figuration – this time without quotation marks? Nancy might be right in his criticism on representation – being in fact a kind of mirror logic, at the end sacrificing any ‘self’ and even being ‘as such’; but does this exclude that, nonetheless, our world is made out of representations? What if Nancy is entirely right, except concerning representation’s ‘ontological’ status? What if representation ‘is’, even when it is not to be approached as being (as such)?

The same question can be raised concerning his analysis of the bourgeois condition. What if his thought does not analyse, but rather *neutralises* the problem? We are singular plural beings deprived from any ‘substantial’ status as person or subject: this is the bourgeois problem modern society is facing; and Nancy’s reply consists in an affirmative ‘unconcealment’ (*Entbergung*) of the being-with concealed in it. What, if this affirmative ontological approach only neutralises the question? Or, what is more: what if this is only a way to deny the specific reality at stake in this problem, i.e. that we, nevertheless, imagine ourselves a substantial identity; that we, nevertheless, keep losing ourselves in false representations, and, therefore, never stop inventing new representations? What if the

alienation of the bourgeois has indeed to be affirmed, but *not* in its being? What if the figures, forms, representations and spectacles in which the bourgeois society lures itself, has indeed to be thought as lure, while these lures have a ‘reality’, which is not to be reduced to being or any other ontological level, in order to analyse the problems they bring about?

For these lures are not simple unreal; we *are* living in a world consisting of representations and spectacles, which are, indeed, not being as such. And, if we have to affirm them in their being as such, what else can we do than say we *should* do so? Again and again, Nancy repeats that we *should* ‘rethink’ the problems of our time in an affirmative, i.e. ontological way. But does he get ever beyond this ‘should’, beyond the injunction saying that we *have to* do so. Rather than ethics based in ontology,<sup>22</sup> as he claims himself, his thought is a kind of ethics based ontology, i.e. an ontology which, in the last resort, remains an ethical imperative. Evil, so Nancy claims, is based in denying the open “spacing” of the being with.<sup>23</sup> But can this “spacing”, can this “being-with” ever totally escape or avoid denial and concealment? Are they not always in some way are another concealed, even in the operation of ‘unconcealment’, which – as Heidegger taught – is always a “concealing unconcealment” (“*bergende Entbergung*”)? This might be the reason why “unconcealment” has finally, somehow or other, the shape of an ethical imperative, even in the Kantian sense of the word: being-with, which is necessarily concealed, therefore, must constantly *actively* be unconcealed – an unconcealment, which can only coincide with the absolute (for unfulfillable) commandment to unconceal.

Here, we might face the weakness of Nancy’s ontology or co-ontology. His critique of the ‘fallen’ (*verfallen*) ways of being coincides with their affirmation, an affirmation that must proceed from another angel, the angel of being (which is: *being-with*). Only, this imperative to consider things otherwise – and to *be* otherwise – turns away from the reality of the ‘fallness’, the reality of representations for instance. Representations mislead us; their logic is a speculative one, locking us up in the mirror effect of a closed world, perfectly coinciding with itself – which is only a represented self, a supposed self (as ‘subjectum’ literally means<sup>24</sup>). However, these misleading representations are ‘reality’; our world is made of them, certainly our modern world, in which visual culture has almost replaced ‘culture’ as such.

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<sup>22</sup> “It follows, then, that no ethics would be independent from an ontology. Only ontology, in fact, may be ethical in a consistent manner.” (Nancy 2000: 21; 1996: 40). See also his “L’«éthique originaire» de Heidegger”, in J.-L. Nancy (2001), *La pensée dérobée*, Galilée, p. 85-113.

<sup>23</sup> “In addition, evil is only ever [found] in an operation that fulfills the *with*.” (Nancy 2000: 92; 1996: 116)

<sup>24</sup> This is: a supposition, a layer, a bearer, supposed to be the ‘real’ support of the representations. See Nancy’s essay on the subject ....

Affirming the basic being – the being-with – of these representations risks to turn away from this reality. Anyway, it does not give any tool to analyse this inauthentic ‘reality’. It only tells that we *should* approach things in an authentic, co-ontological way, and it hides its incapacity to tell what this really means by, again and again, repeating the imperative telling we should re-think being – rethink the *being-with* we (already) are.

The rhetoric of this ‘ethical’ call which appeals to rethink thinking and being is omnipresent in Nancy. One might have the impression that this operates in exactly the opposite way as Nancy has in mind, i.e. as an appealing image of *another* way to handle and think images and representations. Emphasizing being concealed in being’s representation turns away from the strange ‘reality’ representation nonetheless is. Nancy does not give any real tool to analyse this strange reality. He only calls for a ‘conversion’ of ourselves, of the way we approach the *being-with* we are – a call that remains locked up in its ethical shape. His theory lacks an affirmation of representation *as such*, not as being, but *as being’s representation*. For this is what we ‘really’ face in reality. Even if we, indeed, want to approach reality in a co-ontological way, we need some tools to analyse how we never definitively can get rid of these ‘false’, non-co-ontological representations, in other words how we constantly fluctuate between both, between representations and their being-with, between the inauthentic representational approach of reality and the authentic ‘presentational’ – i.e. co-ontological – approach. Claiming that this approach depends on the willingness to listen to the ethical call for co-ontological ‘conversion’, reinstalls the kind of ‘subject’ Nancy criticizes.

In short: an affirmative co-ontological approach of our ‘being singular plural bourgeois’ needs also an analysis of the non-ontological bourgeois persisting in its representational logic.