PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE EDITION

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If there is a “work-in-progress” in contemporary philosophy, it is undoubtedly in work on community—on the common, communism, communitarianism, being-in-common, being-with, being-together, or again in “living together,” which today designates, in a manner that is poignant and sometimes entirely naïve, the preoccupation of a society shocked by attacks that condemn it in its very being even as society simultaneously experiences itself as uncertain and anxious. I am speaking here of European society, but society in North and South America as well as other countries throughout the world seeking to be democratic are also riven with doubt. The entirety of the Western world believed that it progressed toward the possibility of common existence, of law, freedom, and equality. It believed that this word “democracy” was society’s own true foundation. It had been encouraged to think this by the fact that what called itself “communism” revealed itself to be unfounded, imposed by a will that was no less dominating than the imperialism that had already taken possession of much of the world.

Communism that was labeled “real” collapsed for having exclusively gambled on military power and the domination of a worn-out ideology. For its part, democracy was increasingly recognized as a facade behind which economic power operated, which now contained the real mechanisms of control. Politics lost its most illuminating sense.

We were still a long way from such a severe analysis in 1983. However, we were already quite uneasy by the sense of what was called “politics” and

by the meaning that it was possible to give to the entire semantic family of the “common” (leaving aside soviet communism, on the one hand, and spiritual or fascist communalism, on the other). Barely present in political, ethical, and philosophical discourse at the time, the word “community” reemerged as a sign of this unease. Community—how are we to think this as a question?

From the outset, it is not a question of thinking community as substance, as its own and autonomous entity. No more is it a question of thinking it according to a natural given (a people or nation understood as a race or lineage), or according to a work to be realized, a monument to itself as suggested by all the national palaces, forbidden cities, capitals, Kremlins, and all the images of an essence of common being (*res publica*), where the representations and symbols of each “nation” seek to project its assumed identity. It is especially not a question of conceiving a totality—given the ways in which the term “totalitarianism” had come to designate the opprobrium that threatened democracy.

For some, it was equally a question of thinking democracy in ways other than under its legalistic and representative form—or under its liberal form, in the sense in which economic value largely absorbs and dissolves a former ethical value. The “end of communism” certainly did not signify the end of desires or councilist (literally, soviet) hopes, different forms of “self-management,” including anarcho-syndicalist (to employ a previous terminology). In many ways, one could say, taking up a term that is somewhat dated, that a libertarian thinking confronted the rising power of liberalism.

Thinking that sought to situate itself in a quite different space than this confrontation stemmed either from an analysis of democracy as a regulative principle, of an exercise of power that prevented both symbolic and practical appropriation (Claude Lefort), or from attempts to designate an entirely different symbolic dimension of politics, but also dedicated to its realization. It is in this way that certain people spoke at the time of an imperial model, in the sense of what exists beyond nationalities (not in the sense of Hardt and Negri’s “empire”), while others insisted in different ways on the forms or moments of “constituent power,” or again of “revolt” or “surrection” privileging the moment of uprising over that of accomplishment.

Despite himself—unless (but how to decide this?) he felt opportunely summoned—Maurice Blanchot found himself drawn into engaging and contributing to these debates. For some time he had commented on commu-

nism, in part by recognizing in this word the indisputable value of an exigency while immediately assigning it another exigency—of subtracting itself from any type of institution.

When I published a text in 1983 titled “The Unworking Community,” the use of community as a term taken in its Blanchotian sense (“escaping the work” [*échappant à l’œuvre*] and not “out of work” [*en manque d’ouvrage*]) can only have drawn attention to itself, just as recourse to the analyses of Georges Bataille was conspicuous. Blanchot responded to the essay with a book—*The Unavowable Community*—whose closing lines situated the main argument quite clearly: In order for there to be “unworking [*désœuvrement*]” there must be a work [*œuvre*]. In fact, in his thinking on literature, unworking is opened up and played out in the work, through the work, and stemming from and originating in the work [*à partir d’elle*], in all senses of the term.

What is the work to which this book thus referred? It is the work of a politics beyond any politics that is not only instituted but even institutable, the work of an ultrapolitics that the book defined as “excluding nothing.” A similar hyperbole carries politics toward a mythical or spiritual foundation, of which one could say that it is like the exact reverse of the absence of foundation that can be identified by referring to the various thinking about democracy discussed above.

To suggest a closely related way of thinking, one could say that Blanchot gestures toward an anarchic hierarchy, in giving each of these words its due weight—a sacred power stripped of the power of command. I realize today that this could essentially be a version of what Pierre Clastres had for some time been expounding under the name of a “society against the state” and related to “great speech” [*grand parler*]*—the founding or preservation of speech spoken by the group through the repetition of a foundational story [récit].*¹

In certain respects, the comparison is not so anomalous, especially as concerns the foundational story. In effect, Blanchot undertakes something comparable in appealing to a *récit* by Marguerite Duras that is extended by a Christian interpretation. However, the comparison stops at the point where Clastres speaks of “society” since Blanchot rules out society and all its institutions, laws, and organization. For Blanchot, it is a question of pursuing a thought of “community” on the side of love and more precisely a love whose pleasure [*jouissance*]² is unshareable [*impartageable*], unshared,

and “essentially escapes.” It escapes all institution, all forms of communal consistency.

Community takes places beyond or prior to itself [*au-delà ou en deçà d'elle-même*]; within an exceptional, sublime dimension whose fictional reality does not prevent us from speaking of its “political implications.” However, these implications remain completely indeterminate in the context of the book in which they are evoked.

Blanchot’s book moves between a totally inclusive politics (a totality without limits . . .) and a politics that is only designated implicitly [*en creux*] or indefinitely deferred (even if, as its tone suggests, such a politics is considered pressing). This tension can only be an extension of the book itself, of a writing that devotes itself to rewriting a récit in which the interpretation discovers the simultaneous gift and stripping away [*dérobement*] of the “unavowable”—which can only be said of *jouissance* inasmuch as it escapes, and which can only be said or instituted of a “common” that can be valued only by escaping itself.

Beyond all law, a “relation without relation” thus founds the possibility of what enables an association according to the law. In one sense—or in several senses—this is the quintessential version of a founding of politics outside itself—in the heavens, in a spirit, or in a higher destination. It can involve any figure or nonfigure as one likes—divine, mythical, of the people, or of the “neuter”—but it is necessarily about an authority [*instance*] that must be qualified as nonpolitical, hyperpolitical, or metapolitical. In other words, as (why not?) literature itself.

In fact, this is our own situation—that politics no longer knows what it is, what it can and ought to be. Consequently, nor does it know what its place is or, more seriously, what its nature is. Democracy cannot be “evaluated” (*estimée* is Blanchot’s own term) because it offers nothing that merits any assessment other than what one grants to *management*. A superior, sublime foundation, a kind of negative or mystical politology that follows the example of theology—this is what summons an evaluation that is itself superior [*supérieure*].

I have absolutely no doubt that Blanchot’s book thus bears witness to a profound fidelity to his earliest ambitions, but this is not the most important aspect. Moreover, this does not mean that it is appropriate to treat it as fascist (which is far too simplistic). The most important thing here is that he furnishes us with an especially strong image of our common situation

today—"common" in the sense of a common distress and in the sense of a common, widespread, and thoughtless use of the word "politics."

This was all in 1983. But if for over thirty years nobody studied Blanchot's text, it is simply because everyone always believed they knew more or less what "politics" meant, and what politics ought to and can do. Henceforth, we believe this less and less.

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I will not say more about the circumstances in which the various texts were produced, which leads to the present book. Philip Armstrong has done this in an excellent manner in his translator's introduction. I only add all my gratitude for his precise, thoughtful, and demanding translation—one should also say courageous in the face of a text that is rendered extremely complex, even tortuous by the fact that throughout it is commenting on another text that, itself . . .

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