



Helen Petrovsky

## DEPERSONALIZATION(S)

*Опубликовано: Desarrollo e Interculturalidad, Imaginario y Diferencia: la Nación en el Mundo Andino. 14a Conferencia Internacional. Quito, del 21 al 23 de Septiembre de 2006. Academia de la Latinidad. Rio de Janeiro: Educam, 2006.*

Depersonalization. If such is the theme, let us treat it with all due respect. That is, let us try to uncover its complexities and real or ostensible contradictions. Likewise let us not overlook matters that may seem purely technical or, perhaps, speculative, for what speculation aims at is a better understanding of the changing circumstances of our shared existence, which may still lack even in descriptive terms.

I would like to begin by indicating what may seem a paradox: depersonalization is the seamy side of a new collective subjectivity whose emergence is acknowledged far and wide. There are various names for this subject: “multitude” and the redefined concept of the “people” are perhaps the two most broadly discussed. (With the possible addition of “fraternity” with its clearly exclusive overtones, but I will return to this later.) Without further ado I will now focus on the tension, if not contradiction, in the idea of multitude as presented by the Italian neo-Marxist Paolo Virno. Let us linger on the specificity of his approach.

One of Virno’s takes on the multitude is through forms of subjectivity. Among other attributes of the multitude he singles out the “principle of individuation” which boils down to the following: “multitude consists of a network of *individuals*; the many are a *singularity*”<sup>[1]</sup>. For Virno the multiple singularities are a “point of arrival”, the ultimate result of a “process of individuation”. I will not pause to comment on the rather problematic link between individuation and singularity. Here I will confine myself to the simple remark that individuation and the emergence of singularities belong to different registers of social being. But for the moment let us follow Virno’s argument as closely as possible.

The tension I have just mentioned may be dissipated by the way in which Virno treats individuation with reference to the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon. Firstly, let us note that “pre-individual reality” is a complex notion: it includes sense perception which belongs to the whole of the species, “historical-natural” language, whose gradual mastery is individuation *par excellence*, and the so-called “general intellect”, an English term borrowed from Marx, which stands for a current image, a kind of snapshot, of the prevailing relation of production. All of this is further complicated by Simondon’s assertion that since individuation is never fully completed, “the *subject* consists of the permanent interweaving of pre-individual elements and individuated characteristics”: the subject is not this “interweaving” alone, but indeed a “battlefield”<sup>[2]</sup>. In other words, each subject is both “I” and “one”, *simultaneously* unique and universal. However, the cohabitation of pre-individual and individuated is laden with psychological crises, and it is none other than feelings (and passions) that mediate the constant oscillation between the poles. Now, the collective, according to Virno’s reading of Simondon, is that fortunate terrain where the subject acquires a new opportunity to individuate the “share of pre-individual reality which all individuals carry within themselves”<sup>[3]</sup>. This is where individuation attains, in fact, its highest point.

Such is the tension that characterizes multitude as subject position. It is then immediately transposed onto and doubled in the treatment of multitude as collective. For, unlike the “people”,

continues Virno, which displays a “general will” and prefigures the unity of the state, in the case of multitude nothing is either homogenized in the shared experience itself or “delegated” to the figure of the sovereign. The “collective of the multitude” is seen as “ulterior or second degree individuation”, and it cannot but establish the “feasibility of a *non-representational* democracy”[\[4\]](#). (I will only point to the double meaning of “non-representational”. Politically, it is a challenge to democracy as we know it – both in its theoretical and practical forms. While philosophically we enter the well-known realm of the *end of representation*, a theme that may be traced back to the sublime aesthetics of Kant. And, I hasten to add, that lies at the core of the contemporary problematic of community.)

I have implied that singularities can hardly be considered as a result of individuation. This means that they cut across existing social definitions and point to *other* constellations. Indeed, it is a matter of the other, especially if we choose to understand this other as interpellation or call. As we know (or suspect), the inanimate may well be singular, in its broadest scope from the non-living to existing discourses. While the animate may be split in pieces, virtually shattered by forces of singularity combining these bits or fragments of a lost totality into previously unknown series. To put it briefly, individuation works to uphold a set of preexisting norms, it contributes to a linear image of time, and follows the accepted standards of differentiation. Individuation, to return to the opposition introduced by Virno himself, would be on the side of the ultimate One which he identifies with the “people”. Singularity, on the other hand, would have much more to do with the fleeting nature of the multitude.

Let me add that I do not think of “multitude” as a chosen concept. Now that scholars tend to look back in search of alternative political lexicons and concepts, “multitude” is privileged by right of birth, this birth coinciding with an almost immediate repression. (Virno suggests that we review the Spinoza – Hobbes controversy.) No doubt, the word seems best suited to designate a new kind of plurality which *does not* stand in opposition to the one. It is precisely this logic that I would like to underscore and preserve when speaking of a new collective subject. This is why the exposé on Simondon remains such a promising start. Individuation, I will repeat, can be conceived, in all its indeterminacy, as an open-ended process: it is an individually random trace (should we still employ the word and its derivatives) sketched against the background hum of anonymity. (And it is here that I would like to pay tribute to Virno’s rehabilitation of two Heideggerian concepts – those of “idle talk” and “curiosity”. For him, freed from the negative connotations of the “unauthentic life”, both have to do with the mass media and the “distracted” subject which they engender[\[5\]](#).)

To summarize: depersonalization is not the opposite of an emerging collective subjectivity, but rather its very condition. Yet, we can distinguish between “background noise” (everything that has been said concerning “pre-individual” givens so far) and the politics of depersonalization. In the latter case it is the attribution or assignment of names to forces and places. In fact, it is the political practice of *naming away*. (What is the “third world”, for example? And what are the ways, after the place has been named, of resisting its disappearance, indeed obliteration, from the political and even cognitive map? Is the space then void or doesn’t an invisible “multitude” continue to swarm within it, spilling over its borders and doing so continually? But this deserves special attention – the politics of name-giving or simply of names.)

Before going any further I would like to add that the investigation of a new collective subjectivity is located by and large within a Marxian framework. Even if “multitude” is defined negatively – either by what it is not or by features such as nihilism – it is endowed with a transformative potential. I will now turn to a somewhat different problematic in order to examine, at least from one specific angle, what is involved in any speculation that touches upon the political. And, more specifically, on the possible nexus between a (political) concept and the

reality which seems to put it to test. Again it will be a reading of a certain thesis, a reading combining circumspection and a sense of general enthusiasm, and again two voices will be heard almost at once. I am referring to Derrida's sympathetic account of the concept of freedom formulated by Jean-Luc Nancy.

What is called into question (by the one as well as the other) is precisely the term *subjectivity*. No wonder: Nancy's understanding of freedom is at odds with its presentation as "the autonomy of a subjectivity in charge of itself and of its decisions". Indeed, freedom cannot be reduced to mastery and/or "sovereign power over oneself". It cannot be held accountable to law or to politics, to any one of their past or present legitimating discourses. Moreover, it defies nothing less than the "entire political ontology of freedom"<sup>[6]</sup> with its origins in ancient Greek philosophy. And although there may have been little space for a thinking of freedom "up until now" (such thinking is what is lacking today "in the philosophy of democracy"), it is possible that in the future "the political", by way of a general displacement, will open up this space. Which somehow coincides with the "beginning" or the "recommencement" of freedom itself.

What is the premise that allows Nancy to speak of this "initiality" in terms of "specific space-time"? Let us note the following: this *same premise* will be the grounds for a deconstructive critique of Nancy undertaken by Jacques Derrida. What Derrida will disclose (and attack) is precisely the remainder of the discourse of subjectivity (of the *autos*) found in Nancy's writing (and possibly thought). The premise in question is sharing as spacing. Sharing (*partage*), a key concept for Nancy, is at once, as Derrida explains, "partition and participation, something possible only on the basis of an irreducible spacing"<sup>[7]</sup>. And now let us listen to the other voice, that of Nancy: "Freedom <...> throws the subject into the space of the sharing of being. Freedom is the specific logic of the access to the self outside of itself in a spacing, each time singular, of being"<sup>[8]</sup>. Of course, the "subject" here is the "whoever" or the "no matter who" of singularity. Indeed, as Derrida puts it, "it is a question of determining the 'who', that is, the whoever of the 'who is free', 'who exists free', without necessarily 'being free'", since freedom essentially has to do with the *event* of existence. To the decipherment of the premise I mentioned a moment ago Derrida adds in parentheses as if it were a refrain: "this who would thus no longer be a subject or a subjectivity in charge of its will and decisions"<sup>[9]</sup>.

I will leave out the subtleties of Derrida's critique of the "ipseity of singularity", one of the two concepts that Nancy redefines and uses in order to elaborate on his thesis (the other being an extension of Heidegger's thinking on time). Here I will emphasize that a future philosophy of freedom (which is still lacking, as we remember) calls for a radical depersonalization, if only to open up the space for singularities and not philosophical or political subjects. For Derrida this will take the form of a seemingly simple question: "how far is democracy to be extended" and what may constitute its "non-egological" measure<sup>[10]</sup>? Predictably enough freedom would have to encompass the "thing" – anything and everything in the world that, according to Nancy, "comes to presence", whether living or not. As well as the multiple layers of our own "personal" identity so poorly and provisionally fixed. Viewed in this light, depersonalization is the equitable, equal fashion in which the incommensurate – freedom – is shared.

This brings us to the crux of the matter. Derrida prefers to call it *aporia*, the *aporia* of democracy: what is *aporetic* is precisely the relation between equality and freedom. Let me cite a passage which clearly summarizes the problem: "The difficulty arises when one must determine politically, indeed democratically (although one could just as well say here juridically and ethically), the spacing of a presubjective or precratic freedom, one that is all the more unconditional, immense, immeasurable [démessurée], incommensurable, incalculable, unappropriable insofar as it 'can in no way', as says Nancy, 'take the form of a property' (*EF*, 70) and actually consists, Nancy repeats, <...> in exceeding all measure. It is the

incommensurable itself. <...> The whole difficulty will be located in the injunction of the sharing, in the injunction to share the incommensurable in a just, equitable, equal, and measured fashion”[11]. The name Nancy chooses for this sharing of the incommensurable is, in fact, *fraternity*.

But this is not the end of the story. It turns out that the equal is not equal to itself. In Nancy this is stated by way of a parenthesis. He writes: “Equality does not consist in a commensurability of subjects in relation to some unit of measure. It is the equality of singularities in the incommensurability of freedom (which does not impede the necessity of having a *technical measure of equality*, and consequently also of justice, which actually makes possible, under given conditions, access to the incommensurable)” (italics added)[12]. Equality, therefore, is not so much a middle term mediating between the calculable and the incalculable, that is, the world of politics, let’s say, and the experience of freedom. Rather, it is that which gives/gains access to the neutrality of singularities whose measure, like that of freedom, is nothing less than absolute. Such access, though, as Derrida points out, “remains itself necessarily undecided between the calculable and the incalculable”, and this opposition without opposition is “the aporia of the political”[13].

What consequences does this argument have for our own problematic? Now that I have sketched out its contours, I will try to highlight and possibly reinterpret some of the basic points. We do remember that a thinking of freedom is still missing from the philosophy of democracy up until now. However, isn’t there something in the world today that *equals*, without knowing it, such a regime of thinking? In other words, doesn’t this thinking open onto a certain reality, unnamed and perhaps unnamable, which is coming into being – into a shared and dislocated presence – right before our eyes? Indeed, it would be difficult to name it. A neutral zone within the political? If so, then only in the sense that it is a new alignment or, better still, alliance of singularities, for which not even the Nancian “fraternity” (for reasons other than a deconstructive dismantling) appears as an adequate term. In part this reality has already been named. I am referring to the “rogues” (*voyous*) in Derrida and Jean Baudrillard[14], that is, to the reappropriation of a name produced by the political discourse, its radical displacement and, if you will, eventual de-naming. Far from being an act of legitimating an outlaw, it is the calling into question of the law (of exclusion) itself.

But what is the place for these “outlaws”, these “rogues”? Aren’t they, moreover, dramatically depersonalized in that none of the recognizable features may be attributed to them? And how can one possibly treat them as equals? Their provisional derogatory names are signs of the “whoever” or the “no matter who” of singularity. They arrive as events only to upset the balance of the calculable. And as such they are hardly visible, misplaced. A tip of the scale, a readjustment of the “technical measure” of equality and justice – all of this is necessary to alert us to the changing state of things. But there is a kind of solidarity, unlike fraternity, in this quiet subversion. The anonymous does not cry out for recognition. Instead, it is that non-mediating mediation, that materialized schema which links the immeasurable or the incommensurate to measure, the incalculable to a calculation. Each time a new regulating principle, a new criterion, a new unit of measure to ensure this access, this moveable link.

The problem, thus, can be stated in various terms: the multiple (plural) versus the one, the immeasurable versus measure, the depersonalized versus the personal (individuation). However, it is the status of “versus” which is no longer prefigured or given. A collapsing of the opposition? Yes, indeed. Only this collapse does not simply stand for a liberation or an equalizing of the poles in question. Rather, it invites us to think through a different logic of pairing and thus of conceptualizing prompted by experience itself. Our conceptual tools should stand up to the

complexity of the moment. And what we keep exploring, with ever more fervor perhaps, are forms of collective life that are still in the making.

The sharing of the incommensurate freedom. What this concept implies is a commonality through what may appear as infinite division or, again, as spacing, allowing “each time” and even “each one” to be other. Singularities communicate by establishing a relation and yet by remaining divided, that is, absolute in their very uniqueness. Their solidarity (to pick on the word) is that of political loners. However, unlike the “lonely crowds” of yesterday, our time witnesses new assemblages based on a sharing of the commonplace or, to remember Virno, of “‘the common places’ of the mind”, by which he means a set of cognitive-linguistic faculties determining the human species<sup>[15]</sup>. This universality has nothing to do with that of the state. Moreover, it comes to the fore exactly when the state and statehood are confronted with their limits. It is both a chance and a threat. Thus, in the absence of a public sphere the “general intellect”, as Virno declares, may lead to proliferating hierarchies and personal dependence in the sphere of production. But whatever this state of affairs may become one day, it is already there to indicate a singular and potentially subversive constellation. Other images and terms may be found for this changing reality. The point of the matter is an obligation that we seem, once again, to have in common: to avoid giving names and to learn to recognize traces of the future in the present.

---

[1] Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, Andrea Casson (N.Y.: Semiotext(e), 2004), p. 76.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 78.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] See: *ibid.*, pp. 88–93.

[6] Jacques Derrida, “Mastery and Measure”, in: *Idem. Rogues. Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA : Stanford UP, 2005), p. 43.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[8] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, trans. Bridget McDonald (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1993), pp. 70–71. Cited in: Jacques Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

[9] Jacques Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 54, 55.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

[12] Jean-Luc Nancy, *op. cit.*, pp. 70–71. Cited in: Jacques Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

[13] Jacques Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

[14] See: Jean Baudrillard, “Les exilés du dialogue”, in: *Culture of the Difference in Eurasia: Azerbaijan – Past and Present in the Dialogue of Civilizations. 13<sup>th</sup> International Conference. Baku, April 19–21, 2006. Appendix* (Académie de la Latinité. Rio de Janeiro : Educam, 2006).

[15] Paolo Virno, op. cit., p. 42.