



Jean Luc Nancy: A Homage

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A thinker of non-essential structure of being-with as a mode of being Political: A Homage

At a time when our very notions of what it means to 'do' philosophy are under attack, philosopher Jean Luc Nancy has re-defined an astounding new 'political' verge in Continental philosophy. Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, renowned for his wide-ranging, challenging, and thoughtful writings on art, film, and politics, died on August 23 at the age of 81. He is best known for over 200 books, in some of the most scintillating prose gifted to us by a philosopher, covering subjects as diverse as philosophy, literature, politics, film, sexuality, contemporary art, history, and the recent coronavirus pandemic. His work always sought

to engage with contemporary issues as a part of a philosopher's job. Nancy's 2000 essay "The Intruder", served as the basis for Claire Denis's well-regarded 2004 film of the same name.

Born near Bordeaux in France, in 1962 Nancy graduated in philosophy from the University of Paris, going on to teach all over the world for the following two decades while writing extensively. In 1973, he obtained his Ph.D. under the supervision of Paul Ricoeur. In 1973, he took up a teaching job at Strasbourg, where he would work for the next thirty years. In 1973, Nancy obtained his state doctorate from the Université de Toulouse le Mirai; his thesis, which put forth the concept of freedom as a kind of personal property, was reviewed by

Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jacques Derrida, and subsequently published as *The Experience of Freedom* in 1988. In the seventies and eighties, he was a guest professor at the most diverse universities. Jacques Derrida is a philosopher who makes an enormous impression on him. Nancy discussed in many interviews that after Sartre, something very contemporary and innovative was born in philosophy.

A good bit of Nancy's early work was pursued in collaboration with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, who went on to write several interesting works in the area marked by the intersection of the thought of Derrida and Heidegger. Their first book was *The Title of the Letter* (1973), a short but dense essay on Lacan's 'Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious'. Nancy soon published several solo essays, also of a deconstructive nature, each bearing on a key figure or movement in the history of philosophy: Hegel, Descartes, Heidegger, Kant, and with Lacoue-Labarthe, German Idealism. During this time, he and his family lived communally with fellow philosophy professor Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and his family. Describing in Expert Comment the co-teaching style of Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, John Mckean

characterized the pair's preferred method of working "in a haze of cigarette smoke and without the rituals of authority" as "unthinkable in today's universities". Nancy's thinking on the political emerged at the limits of philosophy and art. It was centered on the importance of distinguishing between politics (as an ontic concern with this or that measure or policy) and the political (an ontological concern with the condition of being together). What he proposed consistently was a commitment to being with as a form of being political that resisted the fraternal sacrifice, celebration, and excesses of 'real communism', republicanism, and fascism. In his influential essay "The Inoperative Community" (1985) he warned of the dangers of the community including the totalitarianism of fascism and communism, and the rituals of sacrifice demanded in the name of a nation, people, or religion.

If the breakdown of tradition, the general loss of *sens*, abandons us to thinking of freedom, *sens*, art, and community anew, this abandonment does not entail the freedom to abandon tradition. Such aporias situate and condition the work of Nancy, and this work enters into the tradition of thinkers

who have exposed and limned the mode of aporia. Nancy, in his way, exemplifies the thrust of this particular philosophical tradition, by seeking to break with tradition once again. His thinking refuses to settle down in a fixed territory. His philosophy can be described as work only in the sense of working, a work-in-progress, on the condition that one understands by this not the present unfinished nature of a project which one day will be realized (such a closure thinking would be anathema to a thinker like Nancy), but rather, the labor of thinking which is pursued at the very limit of exhaustion. In his text *Being Singular Plural* (1996), he elaborates a logic of the 'with' by which he tried to distribute singularities which themselves are nothing outside of this with and which communicates them to other singularities. And there lies the non-essential structure of being-with, the singular/plural structure of existence. Nancy argues that Heidegger makes it clear, in the most radical way that every human being (Dasein as he calls it) is always being opened unto a world. Being in the world is being with others, and this being-with is an essential trait—if one can still speak of the essence; rather it is the unsubstantial essence, the being of every being-there. So,

being-there is being-with, to exist is to coexist. We are always being with-, but this being-with is no longer a substantial being-together out of a shared trait, identity. For Nancy, the attempt to think of community radically as being-with gets its start in Heidegger's *Being and Time* but is largely insufficient.

My reflections here touch on a tiny fragment of Jean-Luc Nancy's immense oeuvre. Here I don't want to prescribe what is central and what is peripheral to Nancy's work. This is just a small attempt to provide a spur of interest for further engagement with his work. What is common, what binds us irrevocably to the world and each other, is a bond whose activity unbinds us and uproots us, while submitting us to the open exposition of a being-with the world, and the one another. Nancy displayed extraordinary creativity, all the more impressive since he has gone through serious health difficulties—a heart transplant and cancer—an experience of which he writes movingly in "The Intruder" (2000).

For it is with your corpus that I will continue to think!