The Aesthetic Dimension: Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge

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How should we understand the syntagm of my title? Obviously it is not a question of claiming that politics or knowledge must take on an aesthetic dimension or that they have to be grounded in sense, sensation, or sensibility. It is not even a question of stating that they are grounded in the sensible or that the sensible is political as such. What aesthetics refers to is not the sensible. Rather, it is a certain modality, a certain distribution of the sensible. This expression can be understood, at least initially, by turning to the text that has framed the space of aesthetics, though the term was never used there as a substantive. I mean, of course, Kant's *Critique of Judgment,* which I will use as a guiding thread in the construction of a tentatively more comprehensive concept of aesthetics. For now I only wish to draw from this text the three basic elements that make up what I call a distribution of the sensible. First, there is something given, a form that is provided by sense—for instance, the form of a palace as described in section two of Kant's text. Second, the apprehension of this form is not only a matter of sense; rather, sense itself is doubled. The apprehension puts into play a certain relation between what Kant calls faculties: between a faculty that offers the given and a faculty that makes something out of it. For these two faculties the Greek language has only one name, *aesthesis*, the faculty of sense, the capacity to both perceive a given and make sense of it.

Making sense of a sense given, Kant tells us, can be done in three ways. Two of the three ways define a hierarchical order. In the first of these, the faculty of signification rules over the faculty that conveys sensations; the understanding enlists the services of imagination in order to subordinate

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the sense given. This is the order of knowledge. This order defines a certain view of the palace; the palace is seen as the achievement of an idea imposed on space and on raw materials, as in a plan drafted by an architect. This plan itself is appreciated according to its suitability for the ends of the building. In the second way of making sense, in contrast, the faculty of sensation takes command over the faculty of knowledge. This is the law of desire. This law views the palace as an object of pride, jealousy, or disdain. There is a third way of looking at the palace, a way that sees it and appreciates it neither as an object of knowledge nor as an object of desire. In this case, neither faculty rules over the other; the either/or no longer works. The two faculties agree with each other without any kind of subordination. The spectator may think that the magnificence of the palace is sheer futility; he may oppose its pomp and vanity to the misery of the poor or the sweat of the workers who built it for low wages. But this is not the point. What is at stake here is the specificity of a distribution of the sensible that escapes the hierarchical relationship between a high faculty and a low faculty, that is, escapes in the form of a *positive* neither/nor.

Let us summarize the three points. First, a distribution of the sensible means a certain configuration of the given. Second, this configuration of the given entails a certain relation of sense and sense. That may be conjunctive or disjunctive. The relation is conjunctive when it obeys a certain order of subordination between faculties, a certain manner of playing the game according to established rules. It is disjunctive when the relationship between faculties has no rule. Third, the conjunction or disjunction is also a matter of hierarchy. Either there is a hierarchy between the faculties, which may be overturned, or there is no hierarchy, in which case there is a faculty whose proper power stems from the rejection of the hierarchical relation. This rejection of the hierarchical relation between the faculties that make sense involves a certain neutralization of the social hierarchy. This is suggested in the second section of *Critique of Judgment* through the example of the palace. It is underlined later in the sixtieth section, which attributes to the aesthetic *sensus communis* a power of reconciliation between principles and classes. It is also spelled out a few years later in Schiller's political interpretation of the aesthetic experience as the neutralization of the opposition between the formal drive and the sensible drive. By translating the play between the faculties into a tension between drives, Schiller reminds Kant's readers of what is at stake. Before becoming faculties that cooperate to form judgments, *understanding* and sensibility des-

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ignated parts of the soul, the better part, the leading part of intelligence that has the power to measure, and the subordinated or rebellious part of sensibility that knows only the shock of sensation and the stimuli of desire. As Plato emphasized, the partitioning of the individual soul was a partition of the collective soul, which also was a partition of the classes in the city; there was the class of intelligence and measure that was destined to rule and the class of sensation, desire, and unlimitedness that is naturally rebellious toward the order of intelligence that it must be subjected to. The aesthetic experience is a supplementation of this partition—a third term that cannot be described as a part but as an activity of redistribution, an activity that takes the form of a neutralization.

What I call the aesthetic dimension is this: the count of a supplement to the parts that cannot be described as a part itself. It is another kind of relation between sense and sense, a supplement that both reveals and neutralizes the division at the heart of the sensible. Let us call it a *dissensus*. A dissensus is not a conflict; it is a perturbation of the normal relation between sense and sense. The normal relation, in Platonic terms, is the domination of the better over the worse. Within the game it is the distribution of two complementary and opposite powers in such a way that the only possible perturbation is the struggle of the worse against the better—for instance, the rebellion of the democratic class of desire against the aristocratic class of intelligence. In this case there is no dissensus, no perturbation of the game. There is a dissensus only when the opposition itself is neutralized.

This means that *neutralization* is not at all tantamount to *pacification*. On the contrary, the neutralization of the opposition between the faculties, the parts of the soul, or the classes of the population is the staging of an excess, a supplement that brings about a more radical way of seeing the conflict. But there are two ways of understanding this excess. Just as there are two ways to think of matters of conflict—a consensual one and a dissensual one—there are also two ways of thinking the nature of dissensus and the relationship between consensus and dissensus. This point is decisive. There are two ways of interpreting matters of consensus and dissensus, an ethical one and an aesthetic one.

The *ethical* must be understood from the original sense of *ethos*. *Ethos* first meant *abode* before it meant the way of being that suits an abode. The ethical law first is the law that is predicated on a location. An ethical relation itself can be understood in two different ways, depending on whether you consider the inner determination of the location or its relation to its outside. Let us start from the inside. The law of the inside is doubled. *Ethical* in the first instance means that you interpret a sphere of experience

as the sphere of the exercise of a property or a faculty possessed in common by all those who belong to a location. There is poetry, Aristotle tells us, because men differ from animals by their higher sense of imitation; all men are able to imitate and take pleasure in imitation. In the same way, there is politics because men not only share the animal property of the voice that expresses pleasure or pain but also the specific power of the logos that allows them to reveal and discuss what is useful and what is harmful and thus also what is just and what is unjust.

As is well known, it soon is made apparent that this common property is not shared by everyone; there are human beings who are not entirely human beings. For instance, Aristotle says, the slaves have the *aisthesis* of language (the passive capacity of understanding words), but they don't have the *hexis* of language (the active power of stating and discussing what is just or unjust). More generally, it is always debatable whether a sequence of sounds produced by a mouth is articulated speech or the animalistic expression of pleasure or pain. In such a way, the ethical universal is usually doubled by an ethical principle of discrimination. The common location includes in its topography different locations that entail different ways of being; the workplace, according to Plato, is a place where work does not wait, which means that the artisan has no time to be elsewhere. Since he has no place to be elsewhere, he has no capacity to understand the relation between the different places that make up a community, which means that he has no political intelligence. This relation can be turned around; insofar as the artisan is a man of need and desire he has no sense of the common measure and therefore cannot be anywhere other than the place where the objects of desire and consumption are produced. This is the ethical circle that ties together a location, an occupation, and the aptitude—the sensory equipment—that is geared toward them. The ethical law thus is a law of differentiation between the class of sensation and the class of intelligence.

To summarize, the ethical law, considered as the law of the inside, is a distribution of the sensible that combines—according to different forms of proportionality—the sharing of a common capacity and the distribution of alternative capacities.

But the law of the ethos can also be set up as the law of the outside. After Aristotle's analysis of the basic human community and before his statement on the political animal in *Politics,* he briefly conjures up and dismisses the figure of a subject that is without polis; this is a being that is inferior or superior to man—a monster or a divinity perhaps—a being that is *azux*, that cannot be in relation with any being like it, which is necessary in war. But what Aristotle briefly describes as the figure of an outsider can be turned around as the figure of the immeasurable or the

unsubstitutable from which all that is measurable or substitutable, connected according to a law of distribution, has to take its law at the risk of being cancelled by it. As we know, such a figure has been revived over the last few decades in different forms: the law of the Other, the Thing, the sublime, and so on.

This is what I call the ethical interpretation of the matters of consensus and dissensus, the ethical interpretation of the common and its supplement. The aesthetic dimension is another interpretation of this, an interpretation that dismisses both the inner law of distribution and the law of an immeasurable outside. The aesthetic dimension brings about a dismantling of ethical legality, that is, a dismantling of the ethical complementarity of the three terms: the rule of the common ethos, the rule of the distribution of the alternative parts, and the power of the monster that is outside of the rule. It could also be described as the ethical distribution of the same, the different, and the Other. In opposition to that distribution, the general form of the aesthetic configuration could be described that is not the Other, the immeasurable, but rather the redistribution of the same and the different, the division of the same and the dismissal of difference. The aesthetic configuration replays the terms of the difference in such a way as to neutralize them and to make that neutralization the staging of a conflict that is in excess of consensual distribution. Such an excess cannot be counted according to the consensual rules of distribution but nevertheless does not obey the rule of an immeasurable otherness. The difference between these two excesses is the difference between ethical heteronomy and aesthetic heterotopy.

Let me try to illustrate these statements by describing what I have called the politics of aesthetics, the aesthetics of politics, and the aesthetics of knowledge. In each of these fields it is possible to differentiate the aesthetic approach from the two forms of an ethical approach. Let us start from what I call the politics of aesthetics, which means the way in which the aesthetic experience—as a refiguration of the forms of visibility and intelligibility of artistic practice and reception—intervenes in the distribution of the sensible. In order to understand this, let us return to my starting point, that is, to Kant's analysis of the beautiful as the expression of a neither/nor. The object of aesthetic judgment is neither an object of knowledge nor an object of desire. In the political translation made by Schiller this neither/nor was interpreted as the dismissal of the ethical opposition between the class of those who know and the class of those who desire. This way of framing a politics of aesthetics has been contested by two forms of ethical criticism. On the one hand, there is the sociological criticism that saw an ignorance of the social law of the ethos. Pierre Bour-

dieu's work epitomizes this type of criticism, namely, arguing that the view of aesthetic judgment as a judgment independent of all interest amounts to an illusion or a mystification. The disinterested aesthetic judgment is the privilege of only those who can abstract themselves—or who believe that they can abstract themselves—from the sociological law that accords to each class of society the judgments of taste corresponding to their ethos, that is, to the manner of being and of feeling that their condition imposes upon them. Disinterested judgment of the formal beauty of the palace is in fact reserved for those who are neither the owners of the palace nor its builders. It is the judgment of the petit-bourgeois intellectual who, free from the worries of work or capital, indulges him- or herself by adopting the position of universal thought and disinterested taste. Their exception therefore confirms the rule according to which judgments of taste are in fact incorporated social judgments that translate a socially determined ethos. Such judgments are also part of the mystification that hides the reality of social determinism and helps prevent victims of the system from gaining access to the knowledge that could liberate them.

The opposite form of ethical criticism has been voiced by Jean-François Lyotard. For Lyotard, too, disinterested judgment is a philosophical illusion. It is a logical monster, he argues, that tries to translate into terms of classical harmony the loss of any form of correspondence between the norms of the beautiful and a socially determined public of art connoisseurs. This monstrous replastering of a lost world of harmony conceals the true essence of modern art, which is nevertheless spelled out in Kant's critique: the modern work of art obeys the law of the sublime. The law of the sublime is the law of a disproportion, of an absence of any common measure between the intelligible and the sensible. In a first stage, Lyotard identifies this disproportion with the overwhelming power of the matter of sensation: the singular, incomparable quality of a tone or a color, of "the grain of a skin or a piece of wood, the fragrance of an aroma." But in a second stage he erases all those sensuous differences. "All these terms," he says, "are interchangeable. They all designate the event of a passion, a passibility for which the mind will not have been prepared, which will have unsettled it, and of which it conserves only the feeling—anguish and jubilation—of an obscure debt."[1] All the differences of art add up to one and the same thing: the dependency of the mind on the event of an untameable sensuous shock. And this sensuous shock in turn appears as the sign of

1. Jean-François Lyotard, "After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics," *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, Calif., 1991), p. 141.

radical servitude, the sign of the mind's infinite indebtedness to a law of the Other that may be the commandment of God or the power of the unconscious. Elsewhere I have tried to analyze this ethical turn that put the sublime in the place of aesthetic neutralization and to show that this supposed a complete overturning of the Kantian concept of the sublime. I will not resume that analysis here. What I would like to focus on is the core of the operation: Lyotard dismisses the heterotopy of the beautiful in favor of the heteronomy of the sublime. The result of this operation is the same as that of the sociological critique, though it is made from a very different angle; in both cases the political potential of the heterotopy is boiled down to a sheer illusion that conceals the reality of a subjection.

The political potential of the aesthetic heterotopy can be illustrated by an example. During the French Revolution of 1848, there was a brief blossoming of workers' newspapers. One of those newspapers, *Le Tocsin des travailleurs* (The Workers' Tocsin), published a series of articles in which a joiner describes a fellow joiner's day at work, either in the workshop or in the house where he is laying the floor. He presents it as a kind of diary. For us, however, it appears more akin to a personalized paraphrase of *Critique of Judgment* and more peculiarly of the second paragraph that spells out the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgment. Kant documented disinterestedness with the example of the palace that must be looked at and appreciated without considering its social use and signification. This is how the joiner translates it in his own narration: "Believing himself at home, he loves the arrangement of a room so long as he has not finished laying the floor. If the window opens out onto a garden or commands a view of a picturesque horizon, he stops his arms a moment and glides in imagination towards the spacious view to enjoy it better than the possessors of the neighbouring residences."[2] This text seems to depict exactly what Bourdieu describes as the aesthetic illusion. And the joiner himself acknowledges this when he speaks of belief and imagination and opposes their enjoyment to the reality of possessions. But it is not by accident that this text appears in a revolutionary workers' newspaper, where aesthetic belief or imagination means something very precise: the disconnection between the activity of the hands and that of the gaze. The perspectival gaze has long been associated with mastery and majesty. But in this case it is reappropriated as a means of disrupting the adequation of a body and an ethos. This is what disinterestedness or indifference entails: the dismantling of a cer-

2. Louis Gabriel Gauny, "Le Travail à la tache," quoted in Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (Philadelphia, 1989), p. 81.

tain body of experience that was deemed appropriate to a specific ethos, the ethos of the artisan who knows that work does not wait and whose senses are geared to this lack of time. Ignoring to whom the palace actually belongs, the vanity of the nobles, and the sweat of the people incorporated in the palace are the conditions of aesthetic judgment. This ignorance is by no means the illusion that conceals the reality of possession. Rather, it is the means for building a new sensible world, which is a world of equality within the world of possession and inequality. This aesthetic description is in its proper place in a revolutionary newspaper because this dismantling of the worker's body of experience is the condition for a worker's political voice.

Aesthetic ignorance thus neutralizes the ethical distribution insofar as it splits up the simple alternative laid down by the sociologist that claims you are either ignorant and subjugated or have knowledge and are free. This alternative remains trapped in the Platonic circle, the ethical circle according to which those who have the sensible equipment suitable for the work that does not wait are unable to gain the knowledge of the social machine. The break away from this circle can only be aesthetic. It consists in the disjunction between sensible equipment and the ends that it must serve. The joiner agrees with Kant on a decisive point: the singularity of the aesthetic experience is the singularity of an as if. The aesthetic judgment acts as if the palace were not an object of possession and domination. The joiner acts as if he possessed the perspective. This as if is no illusion. It is a redistribution of the sensible, a redistribution of the parts supposedly played by the higher and the lower faculties, the higher and the lower classes. As such it is the answer to another as if: the ethical order of the city, according to Plato, must be viewed as if God had put gold in the souls of the men who were destined to rule and iron in the souls of those who were destined to work and be ruled. It was a matter of belief. Obviously Plato did not demand that the workers acquire the inner conviction that a deity truly mixed iron in their souls and gold in the souls of the rulers. It was enough that they sensed it, that is, that they used their arms, their eyes, and their minds as if this were true. And they did so even more as this lie about fitting actually fit the reality of their condition. The ethical ordering of social occupations ultimately occurs in the mode of an as if. The aesthetic rupture breaks this order by constructing another as if.

This brief analysis brings us to what I call the aesthetics of politics. Here too the alternative is between an ethical and an aesthetic perspective. The reason for the alternative is simple: politics is not primarily a matter of laws and constitutions. Rather, it is a matter of configuring the sensible texture of the community for which those laws and constitutions make sense.

What objects are common? What subjects are included in the community? Which subjects are able to see and voice what is common? What arguments and practices are considered political arguments and practices? And so on.

Let us consider the most common political notion in our world, the notion of democracy. There is a consensual ethical view of democracy. It is the view of democracy as a system of government grounded in a form of life, the form of freedom determined by the free market. The view that sees a correspondence between a form of economic life, a system of institutions, and a set of values has been favored as long as democracy has been opposed to totalitarianism. As we know, that favor has drastically decreased over the last decade. On the one hand, governments and statesmen complain that democracy is ungovernable, that it is threatened by an enemy that is none other than democracy itself. At the same time, intellectuals complain that democracy is the power of individual consumers indifferent to the common good, a power that not only threatens good government but civilization and human filiation more generally. We are not obliged to take those contentions at face value. What matters is that as they explode the consensual view of democracy by opposing democratic government to a democratic society they urge us to consider a disjunction at the heart of democracy and that such a disjunction is possibly the characteristic not of a bad political regime but of politics itself.

In other words, the current criticism of democracy points to a dissensus at the heart of politics. Dissensus is more than the conflict between a part and another part—between the rich and the poor or the rulers and those who are ruled. Rather, it is a supplement to the simple consensual game of domination and rebellion. How should we understand this supplement? Once more, it can be understood either from an aesthetic or from an ethical point of view.

To understand dissensus from an aesthetic point of view is to understand it from a point of view that neutralizes the ethical rule of the distribution of power. As I mentioned earlier the ethical rule is actually doubled; the common property is doubled by alternative capacities. According to this rule, power is the exercising of a certain qualification of some over those who don't possess it; those who exercise power are entitled to do so because they are the priests of God, the descendants of the founders, the eldest, the best of kin, the wisest, the most virtuous, and so on. This is what I have called the circle of the *arkhè*, the logic according to which the exercise of power is anticipated in the capacity to exercise it, and this capacity in turn is verified by its exercise. I have claimed that the democratic supplement is the neutralization of that logic, the dismissal of any dissymme-

try of positions. This is what the notion of a power of the demos means. The demos is not the population. Nor is it the majority or the lower classes. It is made up of those who have no particular qualification, no aptitude attached to their location or occupation, no aptitude to rule rather than be ruled, no reason to be ruled rather than to rule. Democracy is this astounding principle: those who rule do so on the grounds that there is no reason why some persons should rule over others except for the fact that there is no reason. This is the anarchic principle of democracy, which is the disjunctive junction of power and the demos. The paradox is that that anarchic principle of democracy turns out to be the only ground for the existence of something like a political community and political power. There are a variety of ethical powers that work at the level of the social: in families, tribes, schools, workshops, and so on; parents over children, the older over the younger, the rich over the poor, teachers over pupils, and so on. But as long as the community is made from the conjunction of those powers and as long as it is ruled on the whole according to one or a combination of those powers it is not yet political. In order for any community to be a political one there must be one more principle, one more entitlement, that grounds all of the others. But there is only one principle in excess of all the others: the democratic principle or entitlement, the qualification of those who have no qualification.

This is my understanding of the democratic supplement: the demos is a supplement to the collection of social differentiations. It is the supplementary part made of those who have no qualification, who are not counted as units in its count. I have called it the part of those without part, which does not mean the underdogs but means anyone. The power of the demos is the power of whoever. It is the principle of infinite substitutability or indifference to difference, of the denial of any principle of dissymmetry as the ground of the community. The demos is the subject of politics inasmuch as it is heterogeneous to the count of the parts of a society. It is a *heteron*, but a *heteron* of a specific kind since its heterogeneity is tantamount to substitutability. Its specific difference is the indifference to difference, the indifference to the multiplicity of differences—which means inequalities—that make up a social order. Democratic heterogeneity means the disjunctive junction of two logics. What is usually designated as the political is made of two antagonistic logics. On the one hand, there are men who rule over others because they are—or they play the part of—the older, the richer, the wiser, and so on because they are entitled to rule over those who do not have their status or competence. There are patterns and procedures of rule predicated on a certain distribution of place and competence. This is what I call the rule of the police. But, on the other hand, that power has to be

supplemented by an additional power. To the extent that a power is political, the rulers rule on the ultimate ground that there is no reason why they should rule. Their power rests on its own absence of legitimacy. This is what the power of the people means: the democratic supplement is that which makes politics exist as such.

Some consequences can be drawn from this regarding the mode of existence of the demos. On the one hand, the power of the demos is nothing but the inner difference that both legitimizes and delegitimizes any state institution or practice of power. As such it is a vanishing difference that is ceaselessly annulled by the oligarchic functioning of institutions. This is why, on the other hand, this power must be continuously reenacted by political subjects. A political subject is a subject constituted through a process of enunciation and manifestation that plays the part of the demos. What does it mean to play the part of the demos? It means to challenge the distribution of parts, places, and competences by linking a particular wrong done to a specific group with the wrong done to anyone by the police distribution—the police's denial of the capacity of the anyone. This is what a political dissensus means. A dissensus puts two worlds—two heterogeneous logics—on the same stage, in the same world. It is a commensurability of incommensurables. This also means that the political subject acts in the mode of the as if; it acts as if it were the demos, that is, as the whole made by those who are not countable as qualified parts of the community. This is the aesthetic dimension of politics: the staging of a dissensus—of a conflict of sensory worlds—by subjects who act as if they were the people, which is made of the uncountable count of the anyone. When a small group of protesters takes to the streets under the banner We Are the People, as they did in Leipzig in 1989, they know that they are not the people. They create the open collective of those who are not the people that is incorporated in the state and located in its offices. They play the role of the uncountable collection of those who have no specific capacity to rule or to be ruled.

This is what I call the aesthetic understanding of the democratic supplement, which amounts to a political understanding. I think that we can oppose it to the ethical view of the supplement, which is epitomized in Derrida's concept of democracy to come. My observations should not be misinterpreted. I am aware that Derrida was also concerned with the elaboration of a concept of democracy that would break the consensual-ethical view of democracy as the way of governing and the way of being of wealthier countries. I am also aware that his search for a new concept of democracy was part of a commitment to a number of struggles against various forms of oppression throughout the world. I acknowledge this theoretical

and practical commitment to the main issues of democracy. Nevertheless I think that it can be said that the concept of democracy to come is not a political but an ethical concept. Democracy to come is not, for Derrida, the aesthetic supplement that makes politics possible. It is a supplement to politics. And it is because Derrida's democracy actually is a democracy without demos. What is absent in his view of politics is the idea of the political subject, of the political capacity. The reason for this is simple. There is something that Derrida cannot endorse, namely, the idea of neutralization (or substitutability)—the indifference to difference or the equivalence of the same and the other. Consistently, what he cannot accept is the democratic play of the as if. From his point of view there can be only one alternative: either the law of the same, the law of autonomy, or the law of the other, the law of heteronomy.

What I call the law of the same can be epitomized by two notions that Derrida uses to characterize the consensual view of politics: sovereignty and brotherhood. Derrida endorses without discussion a widely accepted idea that the essence of politics is sovereignty, which is a concept of theological descent. Sovereignty in fact reaches back to the almighty God. God gave it to the kings. The democratic people got it, in turn, when they beheaded the kings. Political concepts are theological concepts that have hardly been secularized. According to this view the concept of the demos cannot have any specificity. It comes down to the concept of a sovereign, self-determined subject who is homogeneous to the logic of sovereignty that sustains the power of nation-states. Therefore the force of the democracy to come cannot be that of the demos. What comes under suspicion thus is not only the figure of the demos; it is the notion of a political subject itself and the idea of politics as the exercise of the capacity of anyone. Just as he identifies the concept of politics with the concept of sovereignty, Derrida equates the notion of the political subject with the notion of brotherhood. From his point of view there is no break between familial power and political power. Just as the nation-state is a sovereign father, the political subject is in fact a brother. Even the concept of citizen—which has so often been used and misused in French political discourse of the last twenty years—has no relevance in his conceptualization. *Citizen* is just another name for brother. We cannot but be struck by the force of Derrida's polemics against brotherhood or fraternity, which include even a critique of parity—as if an equal woman, a substitutable woman, a "calculable" woman still was a brother, a member of the sovereign family. As he conceives of it, a brother is anyone who can be substituted for another, anyone who bears a trait of substitutability.

Democracy to come thus cannot be a community of substitutable per-

sons. In other words, what the democracy to come can oppose to the practice of nation-states is not the action of political subjects playing the part of the anyone. It is the commitment to an absolute other, an other that can never become the same as us, that cannot be substituted—or, we can add, an other that cannot stage his or her otherness, that cannot stage the relationship between his or her inclusion and his or her exclusion. Democracy to come is a democracy without a demos, with no possibility for a subject to perform the *kratos* of the demos.

Such a democracy implies another status of the *heteron*: the *heteron* as the outside, the distant, the asymmetric, the nonsubstitutable. Derrida's notion of hospitality implies much more than the obligation to overstep the borders of nation-states in order to deal with what he calls the "ten plagues" of the International Order.[3] What the *hospes* goes beyond is above all the border that allows reciprocity or substitutability. In this sense, the *hospes* is the strict opposite of the demos. The character of the *hospes* opens up an irreconcilable gap between the stage of the possible or the calculable and the stage of the unconditional, the impossible, or the incalculable. What this precludes is the aesthetic performance of the as if. The *hospes* erases the heterotopy of the demos as he creates a radical gap between the sphere of political compromise and the sphere of the unconditional, between the calculable of the law and the incalculable of justice. What is dismissed by this opposition is the performance of those who play the part of the demos that they are not. When protesters say in the streets that "this is just" or "this is unjust," their "is" is not the deployment of a determinant concept subsuming its object. It is the clash of two justices, the clash of two worlds. This is what a political dissensus or heterotopy means. But it is the kind of justice that Derrida rules out. In his view there can only be either the normal, consensual application of the rule operating as a machine or the law of unconditional justice. This is what the "to come" means. The ethical to come is the opposite of the aesthetic as if. It means that democracy cannot be presented, even in the dissensual figure of the demos, that is, of the subject that acts as if it were the demos. There can be no substitution of the whole by the part, no subject performing the equivalence between sameness and otherness. The heterotopy of the demos is substituted by two forms of irreducible heterogeneity: the temporal heterogeneity of the to come and the spatial heterogeneity of the *hospes*. These two forms are combined in the figure of the first-comer and the newcomer. The *hospes* or the newcomer is the other that cannot come to the place of

3. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York, 1994), p. 86.

the same, the other whose part cannot be played by an other. This dissymmetry is clearly spelled out by Derrida in *Rogues* when he identifies the anyone that is at the heart of the democracy to come. This anyone is not the subject of a dissensus, the subject who affirms the capacity of those who have no capacity. It is the object of a concern. Derrida gives to the "first to happen by *[le premier venu]*," a term he borrows from Jean Paulhan, a quite significant meaning; it is, he says, "anyone, no matter who, at the permeable limit between 'who' and 'what,' the living being, the cadaver, and the ghost."[4] The anyone thus becomes the exact contrary of what appeared first; it is the absolute singularity of the figure that Aristotle conjured up at the beginning of *Politics*, the being that is less or more than the human being—less insofar as it is the animal, the cadaver, or the ghost that is entrusted to our care *(à revoir)*. The other, in that sense, is whoever or whatever that requires that I answer for him, her, or it. This is what responsibility is: the commitment to an other that is entrusted to me, for whom or for which I must answer.

But, on the other hand, the other is whoever or whatever has a power over me without reciprocity. This is demonstrated in *Specters of Marx*, for instance, by the analysis of the visor effect or helmet effect. The ghost or the thing looks at us in a way that rules out any symmetry. We cannot cross its gaze. Derrida adds that it is from that visor effect that we first receive the law—not justice but the law, the justice of which is tantamount to our ignorance, to our incapacity to check the truth of its words: "The one who says 'I am thy Father's spirit' can only be taken at his word. An essentially blind submission to his secret, to the secret of his origin: this is a first obedience to the injunction. It will condition all the others."[5] In order to understand what is at stake in that matter of obedience, we must have in mind another scene between father and son for which the confrontation between Hamlet and the ghost has obviously been substituted. Hamlet is in the place of Abraham, and the ghost in the place of the God who orders him to kill his son. As Derrida puts it in *Rogues*, when emphasizing the principle of heteronomy that is at the heart of this relationship: "It is a question . . . of a heteronomy, of a law come from the other, of a responsibility and decision of the other—of the other in me, an other greater and older than I am."[6]

At this point, Derrida offers us, with the help of Kierkegaard, a theoretical *coup de theatre*: the God who commands Abraham to kill Isaac does ask

4. Derrida, "The Reason of the Strongest (Are There Rogue States?)," *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, Calif., 2005), p. 86.

5. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 7.

6. Derrida, "The Reason of the Strongest (Are There Rogue States?)," p. 84.

him to obey his order. As Derrida puts it in *Donner la mort*, he says: you have to obey me unconditionally. But what he wants Abraham to understand is you have to choose unconditionally between betraying your wife and son or betraying me, and you have no reason to choose me rather than Sarah and Isaac.[7] Sacrifice only means choice, and the choice between the absolute Other and the member of the family is no different than the choice I have to make whenever I enter a relation with any other, which obliges me to sacrifice all the others. To obey the law of the absolute Other is to feel the equivalence of any other with any other. *Tout autre est tout autre* (any other is wholly other): this is the formula of the identity of contraries, the formula of the identity between absolute inequality and absolute equality. Anyone can play the part of the any other that is wholly other. Thanks to the God of Abraham, anyone can play the role of the God of Abraham.

So the formula of radical heteronomy turns out to be equivalent to the formula of political equality; the ethical anyone is equivalent to the political anyone. But it is so only by the self-negation or self-betrayal of the ethical law of heteronomy, which means, in my view, that the whole construction of ethical heteronomy has to be self-cancelled in order to make a politics of the anyone possible.

As stated earlier, I am not willing to say that my notion of democracy is more appropriate than Derrida's democracy. I am just trying to outline the difference between an aesthetic and an ethical understanding of politics. And Derrida's democracy to come is all the more significant in this respect since it makes the radical difference between the two approaches appear in the closest proximity, at the very limit of the indiscernible.

In order to underscore the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics, a certain kind of discourse has to be set to work, a kind of discourse that implies an aesthetics of knowledge. What does this expression mean? First it is a discursive practice that gives its full signification to the apparently innocuous definition of the aesthetic judgment as elaborated by Kant, namely, that aesthetic judgment implies a certain ignorance; we must ignore the way in which the palace has been built and the ends that it serves in order to appreciate it aesthetically. As I have argued, such ignorance or suspension is not a mere omission. In fact it is a division of both knowledge and ignorance. The ignorance of the possession and destination of a building produces the disjunction between two types of knowledge for the joiner: the know-how of his job and the social awareness of his condition as the condition shared with those who don't care for the plea-

7. See Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago, 1995), pp. 58–59.

sures of perspective. It produces a new belief. A belief is not an illusion in opposition to knowledge. It is the articulation between two knowledges, the form of balance between those forms of knowledge and the forms of ignorance they are coupled with. As Plato claimed, articulation or balance has to be believed. The economy of knowledge has to be predicated on a story. This does not mean an illusion or a lie. It means it is predicated on an operation that weaves the fabric within which the articulation of the knowledges can be believed, within which it can operate. From the Platonic point of view, technical knowledge has to be submitted to a knowledge of ends. Unfortunately this science, which provides a foundation for the distribution of knowledges and positions, is itself without a demonstrable foundation. It must be presupposed, and in order to do so a story must be recounted and believed. Knowledge requires stories because it is, in fact, always double. Once more there are two ways of dealing with this necessity: an ethical one and an aesthetic one.

Everything revolves around the status of the as if. Plato formulated it in a provocative way: ethical necessity is a fiction. A fiction is not an illusion; it is the operation that creates a topos, a space and a rule for the relation between sense and sense. Modern "human" and social sciences refuse this provocation. They affirm that science cannot admit fiction. Nevertheless they want to reap its benefits; they want to keep the topography of the distribution of the souls, as in the form of a distinction between those who are destined to know and those who are destined to provide the objects of knowledge. I mentioned Bourdieu's sociology earlier because it is the purest form of disavowed or hidden Platonism that animates modern social knowledge. His polemic against the aesthetic illusion is not the idea of one particular sociologist. It is structural. Aesthetics means that the eyes of the worker can be disconnected from his hands, that his belief can be disconnected from his condition. This is what must be ruled out if sociology is to exist. That is, an ethos must define an ethos; an abode must determine a way of being that in turn determines a way of thinking. Of course this is not only the case for sociology. History, for example, has its own particular way of constructing modes of being and thinking as the expressions of different periods of time. Such is the case for disciplines in general or for what can be called disciplinary thinking. A discipline, in effect, is first of all not the exploitation of a territory and the definition of a set of methods appropriate to a certain domain or a certain type of object. It is primarily the very constitution of this object as an object of thought, the demonstration of a certain idea of knowledge—in other words, a certain idea of the rapport between knowledge and a distribution of positions, a regulation of the rapport between two forms of knowledge *(savoir)* and two forms of igno-

rance. It is a way of defining an idea of the thinkable, an idea of what the objects of knowledge themselves can think and know.

Disciplines delineate their territory by cutting through the common fabric of language and thought. They thereby draw a line of partition between what the joiner, for example, says and what his phrases mean, between their raw materiality and the materiality of the social conditions that they express. They engage in a war against aesthetic ignorance, which means aesthetic disjunction. In other words, they must engage in a war against the war that the worker is himself fighting. They want the bodies that compose society to have the ethos—the perceptions, sensations, and thoughts that correspond to their ethos—proper to their situation and occupation. The point is that this correspondence is perpetually disturbed. There are words and discourses that freely circulate, without a master, and divert bodies from their destinations. For the joiner and his brothers those words may be *the people*, *liberty*, or *equality*. They may be *passion*, *felicity*, or *ecstasy* for their distant sister Emma Bovary. There are spectacles that disassociate the gaze from the hand and transform the worker into an aesthete. Disciplinary thought must ceaselessly stop this hemorrhage in order to establish stable relations between bodily states and the modes of perception and signification that correspond to them. It must ceaselessly pursue war but pursue it as a pacifying operation.

To speak of an aesthetics of knowledge thus is not an occasion to get closer to the sensuous experience. It is an instance to speak of that silent battle, to restage the context of the war—what Foucault called the "distant roar of the battle."[8] In order to do so, an aesthetics of knowledge must practice a certain ignorance. It must ignore disciplinary boundaries in order to restore their status as weapons in a struggle. This is what I have done, for example, in taking the phrases of the joiner out of their normal context, that of social history, which treats them as expressions of the worker's condition. I have taken a different path; these phrases do not describe a lived situation but reinvent the relation between a situation and the forms of visibility and capacities of thought that are attached to it. Put differently, this narrative *(récit)* is a myth in the Platonic sense; it is an anti-Platonic myth, a counterstory of destiny. The Platonic myth prescribes a relationship of reciprocal confirmation between a condition and a thought. The countermyth of the joiner breaks the circle. In order to create the textual and signifying space for which this relation of myth to myth is visible and thinkable, we must initiate a form of "indisciplinary" thinking. We must create a space without boundaries that is also a space of

8. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris, 1975), p. 315; my trans.

equality, in which the narrative of the joiner's life enters into dialogue with the philosophical narrative of the organized distribution of competencies and destinies.

This implies another practice—an indisciplinary practice—of philosophy and its relation to the social sciences. Classically, philosophy has been considered a sort of superdiscipline that reflects on the methods of the social sciences or provides them with their foundation. Of course these sciences can object to this status, treat it as an illusion, and pose themselves as the true bearers of knowledge about philosophical illusion. This is another hierarchy, another way of putting discourses in their place. But there is a third way of proceeding that seizes the moment in which the philosophical pretension to found the order of discourse is reversed, becoming the declaration, in the egalitarian language of the narrative, of the arbitrary nature of this order. This is what I have tried to do by connecting the narrative of the joiner with the Platonic myth.

The specificity of the Platonic myth is constituted by the way in which it inverts the reasons of knowledge *(savoir)* with the purely arbitrary insistence on the story *(conte)*. While the historian and the sociologist show us how a certain life produces a certain thought expressing a life, the myth of the philosopher refers this necessity to an arbitrary, beautiful lie that, at the same time, is the reality of life for the greatest number of people. This identity of necessity and contingency—the reality of the lie—cannot be rationalized in the form of a discourse that separates truth from illusion. It can only be recounted, that is, stated in a discursive form that suspends the distinction and the hierarchy of discourse.

It is here, Plato claims in *Phaedrus*, that we must speak the truth *(vrai)* there where we speak of truth *(vérité)*. It is here also that he has recourse to the most radical story, that of the plain of truth, of the divine charioteer, and of the fall that transforms some into men of silver and others into gymnasts, artisans, or poets. In other words, taking things the other way around, at the moment when he most implacably states the organized distribution of conditions, Plato has recourse to what most radically denies this distribution: the power of the story and the common language that abolishes the hierarchy of discourse and the hierarchies that this underwrites. The foundation of the foundation is a story, an aesthetic affair. From this we can imagine a practice of philosophy that points to the story that is implied in each of the methods that define how a certain ethos produces a certain form of thinking. The point is not to claim that the disciplines are false sciences or that what they actually do is in fact a form of literature. Nor is it to annul them from the point of view of some figure

of the other or the outside: the traumatic revelation of the real, the shock of the event, the horizon of the messianic promise, and so on.

The point is neither to reverse the order of dependence inside the ethical consensus nor to refer to the subversive power of the wholly Other. If an aesthetic practice of philosophy means something, it means the subversion of those distributions. All territories are topoi predicated on a singular form of the distribution of the sensible. A topography of the thinkable is always the topography of a theater of operations. There is no specific territory of thought. Thought is everywhere. Its space has no periphery, and its inner divisions are always provisory forms of the distribution of the thinkable. A topography of the thinkable is a topography of singular combinations of sense and sense, of provisory knots and gaps. An aesthetics of knowledge creates forms of supplementation that allow us to redistribute the configuration of the topoi, the places of the same and the different, the balance of knowledge and ignorance. It implies a practice of discourse that reinscribes the force of descriptions and arguments in the war of discourses in which no definite border separates the voice of the object of science from the logos of the science that takes it as its object. It means that it reinscribes them in the equality of a common language and the common capacity to invent objects, stories, and arguments. If this practice is named philosophy, this means that philosophy is not the name of a discipline or a territory. It is the name of a practice; it is a performance that sends the specificities of the territories back to the common sharing of the capacity of thinking. In this sense the aesthetic practice of philosophy can also be called a method of equality.