Introduction

The history of sovereignties is the history of devastation

—Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*

Toward the end of Ken Saro-Wiwa's great novel *Sozaboy*, Mene, the main character and narrator (a young lorry driver dragged into a devastating war), says: "I begin to think that the world is not a good place even" (1994: 164). Indeed, it did not seem to be after his town, Dukana, and his private life were destroyed, and sickness and death prevailed, as the war had "uselessed[1] many people, killed many others" (p. 181). Yet, at the outset of the novel, set during an unspecified civil war, which is most likely the Nigerian-Biafran War of the late 1960s, the promise was different. The second paragraph of the novel reads as follows:

> All the nine villages were dancing and we were eating plenty maize with pear and knacking tory [i.e., chatting] under the moon. Because the work on the farm have finished and the yams were growing well well. And because the old, bad government have dead, and the new government of soza [i.e., soldiers] and police have come (p. 1).

At the end of the third paragraph, still on the same page, he says: "Yes, everybody in Dukana was happy. And they were all singing" (ibid.).

However, the novel really starts on a different note. The first paragraph contains only one sentence—a strange sentence, to be sure, which reads as follows: "Although, everybody in Dukana was happy at first" (ibid.). We read almost the same sentence as above, this time introduced by *although* rather than *yes* and concluded with "at first." The novel starts with the word

"although" followed by a comma. In its general structural function, "although" is a clause word, introducing an oppositional subordinate clause. At the outset of Saro-Wiwa's novel, it either introduces an *absent* oppositional subordinate clause, or it must be interpreted as a substitute for "yet" or "however," which carries the same oppositional meaning but is a transition word, that is, a transition from another (in this case *absent*) sentence. In either case, we have an absence, the presence of an absence, something which is present and absent at the same time.

The novel starts with, and *as*, a *transition* from a time and place of absence; it is all about this transition, which simultaneously shows and conceals that which remains absent. The transition itself does not point to an empirical time of happiness preceding the war, for that time is now, at the beginning, "at first"—but it is a totalizing moment (and one of misplaced happiness). War itself is total; thus "although" points to a time that is essentially different from the time of now, whose beginning is indicated by "at first," but it is a beginning without end. As Zaza, one of the characters, says toward the end of the novel, "war is war and nobody knows what will happen tomorrow because war is war and *can begin but it cannot end if it have begin*" (p. 147; emphasis added). Thus, "although" really points to a transcendental moment, a time of neutrality when war has yet not begun and cannot begin (for the reason given by Zaza, that is, if it begins, it cannot end). "Although" is a hypothesis and a suspension—the residue of what is now an absence. In what could be read as a reversal of the Hobbesian paradigm (whereby the transition to sovereignty ensures the end of the natural state of war), "although," at the outset of *Sozaboy*, marks the passage *to* a regime of total war. What comes before "although," or in the space (or rather the nonspace) between it and the comma, is suspended. This might be a situation of true freedom and happiness, which could be attained by and through a *real* suspension[2] of the regime of sovereignty that brings about war, destroys social life and common wealth, and turns labor into a strictly productive activity. Yet, under this regime, no more singing and chatting under the moon—until the time comes when everybody is killed or *uselessed*, that is, made useless, unproductive, turned into waste.

The above remarks on Saro-Wiwa's novel provide a useful key to the themes of *Earthly Plenitudes*. The main theme, running throughout the book, is the critique of productivity and sovereignty. Other themes, used to highlight and substantiate such critique (and specific to individual chapters), are those of singularity, exception, usefulness, contingent labor, dependency, and disability.

The book introduces the concept of *dignity of individuation* to give the critique of productivity and sovereignty a positive and constructive dimen-

sion, a sense of direction. That is, the overcoming of categories such as the sovereign individual can find in the concept of dignity of individuation a new ontological and ethical foundation. I think that this concept, which should not be seen as pertaining only to human reality, but as encompassing all forms of life, all instantiations of being, and which precedes individuality, can be very fruitful as a contribution to the effort of rethinking categories of political ontology. This concept is introduced in Chapter 1, but it is applied in all the other chapters, with particularly interesting results, I believe, in the Chapters 4 and 5.

I prefer dignity of individuation to dignity because the former concept stresses the notion that the dignity of each and any individual being lies in its being individuated as such; in other words, dignity is the irreducible and most essential character of any being (that which, taken away, the being is destroyed). Moreover, dignity of individuation, more explicitly than dignity, relates to a being's constituent moments of singularity, plurality, commonality, and universality. It has singularity as one of its constituent moments because each being is singular in its individuation. Yet, singularity itself is plural, as argued by Jean-Luc Nancy, whose work in this respect I treat in Chapter 1. Thus the dignity of individuation is singular and plural. Yet, it is common, for it belongs to all beings; and it is universal because universality is what makes the singular singular rather than the part of a greater whole, a mere partiality. The singular is the universal. The dignity of individuation is the expression of being in the infinitely small.

The dignity of individuation is one of the main points elaborated in Chapter 1. The focus of the chapter is on Leibniz's ethics and political philosophy, which are very closely related to his metaphysics of individual substances. This constitutes the foundation of the whole book. I particularly deal with Leibniz's common concept of justice, a univocal, neutral structure that, from each individual substance, each singularity, opens to the universal and common. The formulation of this concept of justice is fundamental in Leibniz's early critique or displacement, against Bodin and Hobbes, of sovereignty. Leibniz does not eliminate sovereignty altogether, but he sees it as an attribute of God or as a relative function of the political. This is, however, a great step forward, if one thinks that the concept of sovereignty was usually subscribed to in his times.

In the same chapter, I also deal with the concept of subsidiarity. This concept, a contender of sovereignty, is very important in that it grounds the social, communal, dimension of human life as what in Chapter 5 will appear to be a relation of dependency. Basically, the concept allows for the possibility, in a relation of dependence, of helping others without destroying

them—and the only way to do that is to unconditionally recognize the dignity of individuation in everyone.

In Chapter 2, I deal with moments of the defense and critique of sovereignty in the twentieth century. I treat the question of the exception in Carl Schmitt, his logically consistent defense of sovereignty in a world of friend-and-enemy, and his mistrust of solutions that impair the power of decision. Then, I give an account of Jacques Maritain's powerful destruction of sovereignty in the political sphere, the notion that sovereignty is a useless concept. Finally, I speak of Heidegger's political ontology of singularity, which challenges the sovereign decision, and displaces it onto the plane of the uncanny.

I think that Chapter 3 is the most central chapter in the book. In dealing with Bataille's special use of sovereignty (sovereignty as subjectivity, as that which does not serve), the argument finds an exit from the logic of sovereignty—one from which there is no return. Bataille gives sovereignty a revolutionary meaning on the basis of his confusion of the two meanings of "to serve," that is, "to be useful" and "to be servile." As that which does not serve, sovereignty is neither servile nor useful. However, I see this as a problem. I endeavor to distinguish between these two meanings and argue that the category of the useful must still be employed in post-sovereign thought and societies. Bataille's emphasis on consumption and excess is nothing but the logical consequence of mistaking the useful (which is not, of course, the productive in the capitalist sense of the word) with the servile.

With Chapter 4, a new, more "practical" part of the book begins, one that deals with current issues, such as contingent academic labor (Chapter 4) and disability (Chapter 5). At this point, I hope, the validity of the concept of sovereignty has already been undermined, and equal emphasis can be placed on the critique of productivity. Indeed, productivity and sovereignty are part of the same logic, bent to ruthless domination, a logic of raw power and violence, oblivious to (or, in its utter stubbornness and stupidity, even unable to see and recognize) the traits of the human face, let alone the dignity of individuation. Chapter 4 very specifically deals with contingent academic labor, but the argument can be applied to other instances of a similar contingency. The fact that contingency in the workplace is so generally accepted is an insult to what is dearest to the human condition (made of anxiety and hope), the certainty of having a home, the clarity of a return, the recognition of one's achievements. Contingency means being able not to be. Although this is a general existential truth (for anyone can die at any moment), the fact that it is cynically enforced in situations of everyday life, in one's performance of daily, useful activities, only shows the sovereign terror bent to cripple and destroy singularities. In concrete terms, it is the terror of

capital crippling and destroying living labor, living labors. In academia, in the institutionally designed space for the production of knowledge, this terror takes on the form of a disfigurement of the process of teaching and learning, a miserable disabling of vital and rich potentialities.

Following Kittay's dependency critique of equality and concept of dependency work, as well as Elizabeth Diemut Bubeck's concept of care as a substitute for productivity, the final chapter sees in the labor of care an exit from the sovereign regime of capital geared toward profit and exploitation. Stressing the fact that disability is a social construct (made on the basis of actual physical and/or mental impairment), it studies its place within our society from the viewpoint of the critique of the logic of inclusion and exclusion typical of the paradigm of productivity and sovereignty. In the first section of the chapter, attention is also given to the question of gender, the fact that care is usually construed as "women's work." The point, it is argued, is to explode the category and make of care an anti-sovereign and anti-productivist, general and common, modality of human relations and creative praxis. Moreover, given that, as Kittay says, dependency is the inescapable condition of human life, disability, the most serious form of dependency, must become the measure of humanity. In this sense, disability ceases being the exception against the norm. The fact that someone has a physical and/or mental impairment ceases being a disqualifying condition at the political, social, and existential levels. On the basis of the dignity of individuation, human agency can flourish in a manner adequate to each being's being.

I think of *Earthly Plenitudes* as of a sequel to *Labor of Fire* (2005). In the latter, I sought to disambiguate the concept of productive labor, often used both in the sense of the labor that produces and increases capital and in the sense of creative labor. In *Labor of Fire*, I argued that a distinction between these two forms is necessary if we want to exit the logic of productivity and profit, domination and sovereignty, typical of many modes of production, but certainly, and specifically, of the capitalist mode. I called attention to the fact that in Marx living labor is not always the same as productive labor, that the latter is a historically determined instance of the former, but one which constantly loses its creative character. Strictly speaking, productive labor is the labor productively employed by capital. The labor of care, for instance, is by definition *unproductive*. To give the labor of care pre-eminence over other, "productive," forms of labor means to recognize the social usefulness of being unproductive (in the capitalist sense of the word), and thus to challenge productivist logic as such. Indeed, nothing could be more useful to societies than our desire and ability to deactivate and smash the machinery of capital before we are all *uselessed* by it.