

It is Time for Philosophy to Return to the City

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Abstract: Philosophy has been a subversive practice since the time of Socrates. Recognizing no authority other than the persuasiveness of dialectics, philosophy designated a thinking beyond the boundaries of the city: an estranging conception, an elsewhere of thought. It is from this critical distance that philosophy derived its political vocation. In the era of global capitalism, however, philosophy has become institutionalized and lost its subversive potential. To this end, philosophy has accepted that it should no longer pose too many questions, especially the ones which are most fundamental, resulting in a dearth of in-depth public questioning, and the slumber of critical reasoning. Hence, philosophy needs to rediscover its political vocation in order to reawaken consciences and to once again embrace that theoretical and practical commitment which never accepts anything without critical reflection. By doing so, it will be possible to restore philosophy to its original role as a guiding light for the community.

1.

How can philosophy exist in a world without an outside? Upon careful diagnosis, the ontological regime of the globe is that of saturated immanence. Immanence must be understood in the etymological sense of that which remains, which persists as itself, always within itself, without an outside, without exteriority. A static, compact immanence: there are no splits, no voids, no lines of flight, no ways out. This spatial and temporal saturation may seem surprising, for is this not the world of absolute flows, of capital, of technology, of media? Information, fusion, density: all follow the frantic beat of a breathtaking acceleration. And all this takes place, of course, under

the sign of inevitable progress. But this is the semblance of a world trapped in the whirling economy of time, whose very essence paradoxically relies on speed.¹ The flows of the global web mark out the same orbits, following an ever-identical and repetitive movement. It is not that there is any lack of chaotic spirals, of tumultuous swirls. But they do not upset the constant rhythm of these absolute flows, which is irremovably fixed, secretly immobile. Speed collapses into stasis, acceleration ends up in inertia. It is like running on a treadmill in order to avoid slipping backwards. Everything changes—yet, fundamentally, nothing truly does. Inertial change is the brand of the synchronized globe.

“Saturated immanence” refers to the asphyxial present of a world which, basing itself on the belief that it cannot be harmed, claims to have immunized itself against the “outside.”² Thus it has swallowed up, banished, destroyed, all that is other to itself. It is driven to do this by an overbearing immunological impulse: namely, the impulse to remain intact, to go on and on, whole and unscathed. What is the point of foraying into the glacial, deathly beyond? Even posing the question is the victory of exophobia—an abyssal fear, a cold panic, horror for whatever is external. This angst grips and stifles thought. How could one imagine any alternative? Any taking of distance, any interruption, is passed off as vain and impossible, even before it starts being denounced as a terrorist threat. One can dream only *internally*, within the regime of saturated immanence, in which dreams often turn themselves into nightmares. The bitter acknowledgement that “There is no longer an outside” has colored even the most radical thought of recent years.

In the contemporary imaginary, it seems easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Here lies the enormous discrepancy between scientific understanding and political impotence. At this point, capitalism has occupied the entire horizon of the thinkable. Internally, everything is supposed to be possible—but outside, nothing is. Then, the question should be posed of what “possible” and “impossible” mean, if in the techno-scientific context—even the most futuristic one—there is no limit that holds, while in the political context all prospect of change is precluded *a priori* by the “No” put up by the market. You can become immortal, but you cannot escape capitalism.

1. See Hartmut Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-modern Temporality* (Aarhus: NSU Press, 2010).

2. Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

The world of saturated immanence is the world of the global-capitalist regime, the claustrophobic space oscillating between the non-event—the steady flows of liberal democracy—and the imminent planetary collapse. It is the closed world of a preventative police, a temporal prison where farsightedness crosses over into a clairvoyance that tries to ward off any change. This world is condemned to the imperative of the day, to the exhausted torpor of the extended alarm, to the tireless half-sleep of a light that never goes out, in a diurnal virtuality that knows no night. What prevails here is a lack of sensitivity, a denial of memory, a limiting of the faculties of perception, the impossibility of reflection. It is a prolonged trance state, a mass sleepwalking.

2.

In this almost inert half-sleep, this pervasive torpor, is it possible to wake up again? What margin is there for thought, if it is gripped by fear when stepping into the outside—if what everywhere dominates is a diffuse exophobia? Thinking estranges—makes one foreign. As a vocation for what is beyond, philosophy seems to be dangerously out of place in a world without an outside. It is not by chance that philosophy is harried by two ruinous temptations: closing in on itself, abstracting itself completely from the world, or becoming absolutely other. Where knowledges are handed over to calculation and to technologically-assisted simulation; where procedures of simplification peddled as truth procedures abound; and where all understanding has its own place and performative function—then philosophy would end up being divested of its role.

It is time for philosophy to return to the city! This wish, this demand touches a topic ignored and almost forbidden for a long time. However, it also brings philosophy back to its political vocation. This means a reciprocal relation, where philosophy is not only inspired by the *pólis* but aspires to the *pólis*. It is, therefore, a political vocation because its inclination is to be found in the *pólis* itself. Thus, philosophy is summoned to make its return, without ever forgetting that it is out of place and out of step with the times—particularly in the city. After a long absence in which it has lost its voice, philosophy is called on, invited to draw the community back into the light, to reawaken it.

The waking vision, *húpar*, is the very characteristic of philosophy, its distinctive trait, to the point of becoming its symbol. One can either spend one's life asleep, or one can stay awake, keeping watching. Those who do not philosophize undoubtedly live. But their existence is diminished, their

participation in politics compromised. Even before Plato and his *politéia*, Heraclitus denounces the “political night” and the sleepwalking so widespread among his co-citizens; indeed, no community can do without the wakefulness and awareness to which philosophy leads.

3.

Nevertheless, philosophy proves to be a subversive threat to the city. From the outset, philosophy has a great estranging effect; it does not sooth, console, reassure. Extravagant, eccentric, extraordinary, strange—perhaps, foreign? Doubtless surprising, incomprehensible, irritating. Socrates is out of place, *átopos*, the Greek epithet, which has been coined for him.³ *Atopía* is the characteristic of those who disconcert others. Socrates attracts and repels, fascinates and disturbs. What on earth will this mania to ask questions ever achieve?

Some of his fellow citizens would run away when they saw him approaching from a distance—for whoever got trapped in a discussion was lost. Others considered him a timewaster, lampooned him, scorned, derided and insulted him; some even raised a hand to him. What had the Athenians done wrong to deserve such a nonsense-merchant? And such a pesky and pedantic one, at that? Rather than dedicate himself to the stonecutter’s trade in his father’s workshop, this madman went around polemicizing over pointless questions, speciously flipping discussions around and turning words on their heads. Thus, between one trick and another he threw the most commonplace ideas into doubt—even the ones everyone agreed on—and blathered about sacred matters. He recognized no authority and even mocked the sovereign *démos*. After posing a long string of problems, he did not resolve a single one; rather, he had the condescension to say that he did not know. In fact, he was content just to show others that they did not know, and took near-delight in leaving them humiliated. And what kind of person would like to hear themselves being called ignorant—in particular in the public square? Many were insulted and had more than they could handle of his pointless, dangerous caviling. Only a couple of idle youths, dazed by his drivel, went around with him on his forays through the city.

But Socrates’s strangeness does not end there. His ability to endure hunger, exertion and cold is proverbial; and even more proverbial is his eccentricity, which is particularly evident in the practice of his thinking. Socrates is present, but it is as if he were not, as if he suddenly found himself

3. See Plato, *Symposium*, 215a, 221d; *Alcibiades*, 106a; *Theaetetus*, 149a; *Gorgias*, 494d.

to be distant. Perhaps he is not really even in the city. He roams around the *agora* but transcends its limits. He wants to pull his fellow citizens along with him, into that elsewhere. He lives with others, but does not live like others. He seems like he is stateless, an expatriate in the *patria*. Each time he crisscrosses the *polis* he does so as a foreigner, observing its life “from above” with his estranging gaze. Distance is needed to be able to see what would otherwise be too close to be seen. His forays into the outside world, his wandering between the market and the court, are digressions and, likewise, transgressions. He openly deviates, diverges, dissents. He has no fear of stopping here or there to isolate himself, in order to think. He is well aware that this behavior of his can seem ambiguous and extravagant. Abandoning himself to the solitude of thought in the public square—what a dangerous enterprise this was!

Socrates openly embraces all this. His atopia is a heterotopia, not simply out-of-place, but also an allusion to another place. If Socrates remained in the city even while through his thinking he pushed himself outside of it, this was because this elsewhere of thought provides the lever to decenter the order of the *polis*, which is too closed, asphyxial, homologated. And in so doing, he shows that this is but one possible order. For this reason, he thought alone, but also thought with others. Can dialogue change Athens’s future?

With Socrates, philosophy discovers its political vocation. Yet that entrance is more dramatic than imagined, and the city is full of dangers lying in ambush. Socrates wants his questions to awaken others from the sleep of illusions—first and foremost, from the illusion of knowledge. But not all are open to such an unwelcome, bitter wake-up-call. With his forays into the *agora*, exercising the maieutic art of his mother—which he preferred to his father’s trade—Socrates wants to spark the rebirth of his fellow citizens’ soul, which would in turn imply a rebirth of the city. But things turn out rather differently. Socrates’s defeat is a certainty. For this “prophet” of thinking, who sought a city of justice, there was to be no way out, no path to safety.⁴ First the epochal trial and then his death opened up the chasm between philosophy and politics.

Socrates’s death is described in the *Phaedo*, the dialogue that Plato dedicated to the immortality of the soul. The philosopher’s final acts in his cell are described evocatively. While the sun is setting, his pupils around him break into tears. Socrates, however, calmly continues the dialogue, comforts

4. Leo Strauss, *Jerusalem and Athens: some preliminary reflections* (New York: City College, 1967).

the others, and maintains his composure as he drinks the hemlock. When almost all parts of his body are already cold, he exclaims “Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius. Pay it and do not neglect it.”⁵ These are his last words. The Greeks used to sacrifice a cockerel to Asclepius, the god of medicine, as a sign of gratitude, when they were cured of some illness. So, what did Socrates want to say, here? Why on earth make such an offering, if he was about to die? There are at least two meanings.

When he invokes a well-known rite of thanks in the moment of his departure—at one step away from death—Socrates declares his gratitude, because he has been cured of that disease which is life itself. The philosopher’s death is the confirmation of his life. During the time he was given on earth, he never relented from learning to die. Having migrated with thought, he now prepared for the final migration. But in this scene—philosophy’s most dramatic, and most decisive scene—Socrates is also in dialogue with his friends and students surrounding him, who are destined to outlive him. He entrusts his words, his memory, to them. They continue to dialogue, adopting what he said as their own and proceeding with his teaching. This is immortality.

Nietzsche sees a further meaning when he speaks of “revenge.”⁶ Plato transforms that death, makes Socrates immortal, turns the defeat into a victory. Above all, it is a victory over the decadent city, but also a victory over the world. Veering away from the catastrophe of the *bíos politikós*, philosophy will erect another order, an extrapolitical city of memory. The life of theory distances itself from the *pólis*, its collapse now sealed by the infamous sentence passed against Socrates. Refusing to flee, he remains an Athenian citizen until his last breath. But in the moment of his death he becomes a witness to the post-political world, he stands up as a torchbearer for philosophy. Already strangers to the city, philosophers become foreigners everywhere in the world. Nor would they ever be able to forget the death of Socrates. In their exile, this appalling scandal would serve as the constant warning of a latent conflict with the city, one that had temporarily calmed but only been pitched into the future.

4.

Socrates’s execution represented a definitive caesura: it put an end to philosophy’s fleeting and conflict-strewn idyll in the *pólis*. Nothing would be

5. Plato, *Phaedo*, 118a.

6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols, Or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

the same as before. For philosophers, life in the city had now become too dangerous. Plato also left Athens for the shores of Syracuse in a first tumultuous voyage, marked by many misadventures, but he returned from Sicily around 387 BC.⁷ He then acquired a piece of land near the little wood dedicated to the hero Academus, to the north-west of Athens's city walls, and founded a new school there.

No more disdain, no more derision—no more death. Philosophical thought, that misunderstood ecstasy, must not be expounded on the public square. Adequate protection was needed against any potential violence. But it was not even remotely conceivable that the philosophers could abandon the city entirely, dooming them to hermitage. What was at stake, here, was the *bíos theoretikós*, their life of theorizing, a life which was itself born within the city. What would have become of it on the outside, in an apolitical context? Perhaps it was possible to imagine retreating within oneself. This would have been a refuge for ideas, a shelter for philosophers and their absences, an abode where they could reflect, at due distance, on the good of the *pólis*. This would have allowed them to concentrate and eased the philosophical flights “in the depths of the earth” and “above the sky” so well described by Pindar.⁸ Therefore, there was to be no new Atlantis, no utopia. Rather, the elsewhere of thought could be saved by translating atopia into a heterotopia—as per the Socratic ideal—and instituted in a real place, close to the city, namely in a school. Thus, another space based on its own laws and where thought would be sovereign—contrasting with, and in some respects, opposed to, the city's own laws—was opened up in the area of the *pólis*. This was Plato's great intuition when he founded the Athenian Academy. The philosophical elsewhere was redeemed and protected thanks to a heterotopic institution—one that would have decisive and enduring effects on world history. From Plato's *genius loci*—which inscribed the academy's difference on the architecture of the city—would spring forth all the “sites” dedicated to the practice of thought: academies, universities, schools, monasteries, etc.⁹

Even in defeat, the philosophers did not bend down to exile. Following Socrates's teaching, they returned—but they brought their exile back within

7. See Plato's *Seventh Letter*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 1586.

8. Plato, *Theaetetus*, 174a.

9. Peter Sloterdijk, “The City and Its Negation: An Outline of Negative Political Theory,” in *The Aesthetic Imperative: Writings on Art*, ed. Peter Wiebel, trans. Karen Margolis (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 113–140.

the *pólis*. Their presence-absence would, in future, represent the stigma that the deceitful and shameful Athens had so largely deserved. For now, philosophy's subversive activity was institutionalized in the Academy. What a humiliation for the *pólis* this was! For roaming around within its walls were these strange, eccentric individuals who lived in the city as if they were elsewhere, who resided there as foreigners. Indeed, they openly laid claim to this, parading the fact. They were witnesses to another, better city, citizens of the *Allopolis* now established within the *pólis*.

Born of Socrates's death, philosophy was thus the daughter of political defeat. But the Acropolis of thought managed to resist, for centuries and millennia. Thus, *philosophía* turned out to be the name for the capacity for exile. And philosophers, these saturnine witnesses, these transcendent inhabitants who had opted for permanent migration, knew how to convert this irreparable defeat into a future conquest.

5.

The tension between the philosophers and the community is radical and irrevocable during the centuries. There are countless examples. On many past occasions, this hidden tension ultimately concluded in overt persecution. How could one forget the flames in which Giordano Bruno was burned alive on Rome's Campo de' Fiori on 17 February 1600—another dramatic, mournful scene? Bringing to mind the death of Socrates, it provided a modern, even crueler and more ruthless version of the insuperable tension between the philosophers and the community.

The great masterpieces of philosophy have seen the light of day in solitude, distant from the *agorá*, but in latent, strenuous tension: from the village of Voorburg where Spinoza managed to concentrate his efforts on his *Ethics*, to the smoky London rooms where Marx wrote his *Capital*, from the refuge of Todtnauberg where Heidegger finished *Being and Time*, to the chalet on the Norwegian fjord where Wittgenstein found a little calm.

This clarifies why, despite everything, philosophy has never lost its original disruptive charge and its critical potential. The resistance it puts up to reality springs from its own atopia, which renders every *arché*, every principle, fundamentally an-archic. From the form of life to scientific concepts, from modes of action to widespread habits, nothing escapes its vigilant gaze, which sifts through not only traditions but also that which has become so obvious as to seem natural, immutable, eternal. In the sphere of existence as in the sphere of politics, philosophy points an accusing figure against what is self-evident.

Thus, critique is its dimension. But to critique does not mean—as some would have it—to cavil or to condemn. Rather, it is that theoretical and practical commitment which never accepts anything without reflection. Uncomfortable, controversial, devoid of any unambiguous criteria, and without stringent proofs, philosophy has never abandoned its aspiration to grasp the connections, discovering the connections between all that appears single and separate. Philosophy does not subject itself to the criteria of usefulness, and does not subordinate itself to some purpose, but always looks beyond.

6.

The twentieth century represents one of the higher points of philosophy's more than 2,500-year history. Indeed, this historical period was characterized by an unprecedented radicality. This was expressed in the acute and sometimes provoking critique of reason, as well as in the attempt to deconstruct the Western tradition. The break from the past marks a watershed in the stream of thought.

The extreme radicality of twentieth-century thought is also to be explained in light of the catastrophic events that pockmarked the century: the two World Wars, the Holocaust, and Hiroshima. Reflection on modernity took its cue not only from the unprecedented innovation, from the extraordinary scientific progress, and from the explosive results achieved by technology, but also from incomparable processes of destruction and self-destruction. Philosophy was profoundly shaken, lacerated, afflicted by all this; all the more so given that it had already detected some of these outcomes. It became a critical voice—but no longer in the name of Reason; its target, rather, was the technological rationality of the Western world. It was necessary to re-question old concepts which had ossified over time and to demolish old idols that had passed with impunity into the repertoire of the sciences, producing crimes and misadventures. Philosophy felt the weight of this responsibility. After 1945, “the innocence of a neutral self-understanding was all over.”¹⁰ Whereas soldiers, politicians and scientists tried to exonerate themselves or escape scrutiny, most philosophers declared their own guilt, not without tensions, conflicts and paradoxes. But to admit the crime of thought, a heavy charge ever since the times of Plato, did not mean succeeding in thinking crime itself.

10. Jürgen Habermas, “Does Philosophy Still Have a Purpose?” in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 4.

Emblematic is the so-called “Heidegger case.” The greater the distance one gains from it, the clearer the symbolic character of this Stalingrad for philosophy, which goes beyond his figure and even his thought. For this twentieth-century drama brings to mind the ancient one, and in the background, there stands a double image which sometimes assumes the traits of Socrates, at other times, those of Plato. Is this the repeat of an unfair trial against the philosopher, this time not in a courthouse but rather—as a sign of the times—a trial by media? Or was it the philosopher who ventured into a stormy sea?

Through the *Black Notebooks* the question becomes clearer.¹¹ After centuries of absence, philosophy was brazen enough to re-enter the city. And once again it lost its challenge for power, becoming subaltern by way of an incautious and rash alliance. But on closer inspection, philosophy did not make its entrance into the city; rather, it allowed politics to burst into the university classrooms, and not without violence. To provide a synthesis of Heidegger’s error, one can speak of a political territorialization of atopia. This is especially contradictory, considering that Heidegger is the philosopher of statelessness. Though, his error does not cancel the anarchitectures of his thought.

One cannot, however, limit the problem to the dangers of political activism, which, after all, seduced more than one philosopher over the course of the last century (one need only think of Sartre). In the “Heidegger case” the tension between philosophy and politics re-emerges in the most exasperated terms, and it would be short-sighted not to perceive its effects today.

In this sense, Heidegger seems to operate like Plato. This short-circuit was established already by Heidegger’s direct students, who introduced this comparison as a more or less successful kind of apology. The first was Arendt who, in her controversial 1969 essay *Martin Heidegger at Eighty*, spoke of a “false step,” a “temptation [. . .] to get involved in the world of human affairs.”¹² She further adds, as an excuse, that “the attraction to the tyrannical can be demonstrated theoretically in many of the great thinkers.”¹³ Gadamer followed her years later in an article with the eloquent title *Back from Syra-*

11. Donatella Di Cesare, *Heidegger and the Jews: The Black Notebook*, trans. Murtha Baca (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

12. Hannah Arendt, “Martin Heidegger at Eighty,” in *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy: Critical Essays*, ed. Michael Murray (London: Yale University Press, 1978), 301–302.

13. Arendt, “Martin Heidegger at Eighty,” 303.

cuse?¹⁴ Beyond suggesting a rather questionable comparison—and passing off adherence to Nazism as an accidental error—this image reasserts the cliché of the philosopher who, giving in to the temptation to realize his ideas, both causes damage and ends up being himself the victim. Better, then, not to venture outside of thought's own proper abode. The popular-liberal stereotype of the philosopher who is incompetent in matters of politics was destined for great success. Moreover, Arendt and Gadamer were the first liberal Heideggerians. Concealed within the foundations of this stereotype was a little-edifying conception not only of philosophy, but also of politics: the former abstract, rigid, characterized by a “tyrannical” trait; the latter concrete and simple, resistant to ideas and ideals. Then, it would be appropriate, and indeed necessary, to establish a separation between them. It should be added that neither Arendt nor Gadamer themselves complied with this obligation; but both renounced any critique of liberal democracy. In different forms, they were exponents of a new tendency which has taken root since the immediate post-World War II period: the bid to democratize democracy. It was this tendency that marked their distance from Heidegger, whose political reflection focused on the critique of liberal democracy.

For this reason, even when retrospectively evaluating the events of the recent decades, the image of Syracuse ought to be rebuffed. Not only does it banalize the “Heidegger case,” but it also suggests that philosophy—having openly declared its own incompetence—should stay out of politics or, at most, run along behind in an ancillary role, providing assistance and support for liberal democracy. If the philosopher may make mistakes in individual choices of active politics, the question here is not limited to his supposed amateurish incapacity.

A lesson for the present and the future was, however, drawn more or less tacitly from the “Heidegger case.” For after that humiliation, after that ignominious defeat—perhaps the most burning and dispiriting of setbacks—philosophy seemed destined to bear the weight of its unhappy consciousness, shrewdly limiting itself within academic boundaries, outside of politics. Even insofar as it did intervene in politics, it adapted itself to a role as the functionary—or, better, the press officer—for democracy. Accordingly, one cannot properly understand the contemporary panorama without casting some light on the “Heidegger case.”

14. Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Back From Syracuse?” trans. John McCumber, *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 2 (1989): 427–430.

7.

In recent times, a new normative philosophy has been established. Emboldened by a compliant academic capitalism, it has transcended old boundaries, even though it was born under the skies of analytical inertia. Far from the radicality of twentieth-century thought, this philosophy openly declares itself a *handmaiden* not only of science, but also of politics—or better, of economics. So it has proven able to find a place, although indecorous, in the age of advanced capitalism.

If one had to summarize what has happened over the turn of the millennium, in a transition where continuity has prevailed, one could say that philosophy has entered the city again dejected, wearing sackcloth and ashes. Above all, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of totalitarianism, philosophy has been ready to collaborate with politics, to support democracy and encourage pluralism.

Born to Arendt in the era of McCarthyism, the dubious “two totalitarisms” thesis has rapidly become a conceptual blockage. Indeed, not only has it prevented any in-depth reflection both on the peculiarities of Stalinism and on Nazism’s political project, but it has also offered an alibi for not thinking.¹⁵ The label “totalitarianism” marks the limit beyond which one may not legitimately venture; it holds up the sign of prohibition which discredits any alternative in advance and represents a perennial admonition.

Mindful of its recent past, philosophy can move—and does move—only on one side of the line, namely in the domain of democracy. Here, it has a cautiously negative mandate, that of exercising some critique and nurturing a few doubts, denouncing small abuses and irreparable suffering. However, it also has an outwardly positive role, namely its commitment in defense of democracy, which is fragile, corrupt, difficult to conquer, and impossible to achieve once and for all. This new condition for philosophy, promoted to an *ancilla democratiae*, is explicated in the extreme fashion in Richard Rorty’s essay *The Priority of Democracy over Philosophy*.¹⁶

But can a philosopher bestow primacy to any political form over thought itself? Even if he employs an especially hyperbolic formulation, Rorty is hardly alone in this vein. On the one hand, philosophy takes a step back; seeking to absolve itself, it almost dissolves itself, condemning itself to irrel-

15. See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 361ff.

16. Richard Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 175–196.

evance. On the other hand, democracy comes to assume a supremacy which is not so much political as it is philosophical. That is, democracy becomes the only possible political form, the only one which is desirable or even thinkable. Philosophy identifies itself with democracy. On top of that—as Derrida repeatedly emphasized—this political form is never realized, but it always is “a democracy to come.” The suspicion is that democracy is, in the final analysis, a synonym for public discussion, or even for dialogue itself. This is patently the case in Habermas’s theory, where democracy derives from a more foundational principle of discourse, able to encourage participation, safeguard plurality and promote consensus. Political action is channeled and directed toward the communicative terrain, onto which it is called to show its ability to mediate between contrasting ideas, interests and objectives. If politics is not reducible to Schmitt’s friend-enemy opposition, it is not even possible to aim at taming all conflict, throwing oneself into a zealous quest for consensus.

The story that comes after is well known: the now-subordinate philosophy has done nothing but ratifying, or every now and then rectifying, an ever-more dilated democracy, on the one hand, imperial in disposition, and on the other hand, a formidable *dispositif* for producing consensus. Hence the paradox: even as philosophy proclaims its return to the city, it also refutes and disproves this very return. This missed *rendez-vous* between philosophy and politics, after the trauma of Socrates’s death—after Marx’s and Kierkegaard’s powerful prophecies—allows the flourishing of a profound “disaccord,” a genuine incompatibility.¹⁷

The collapse of the totalitarian regimes marked the triumph of democracy. But this success goes hand-in-hand with the hollowing out of democracy, to the point that it becomes ever more formal, ever less political: on the one hand, a plaything of the state apparatus, on the other, an uninterrupted reporting mechanism directed at sublimating the body of the people in the totality of “public opinion.” Moreover, this pairs with an understanding of politics as sheer administrative governance.

Here philosophy has lost any room to maneuver, after anti-utopianism was established. But the so-called “end of utopias” was nothing but the unconditional, unlimited, total affirmation of capitalism—an economic order that would not have been able to impose itself without consensual democracy as a political order, entrusted to the sovereign power of the state. Philosophy has accepted that it should no longer pose too many

17. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

questions, especially the ones which are most fundamental, since the alternative would be stigmatized as “totalitarianism”—and the warning has always been explicit. Thus, it has helped to democratize democracy and, within the perspective of a widespread biopolitical power, it has ended up underestimating the sovereign power of the state. Here, in taking the statist dimension of politics for granted, philosophy risks arriving at an impasse: if thought is always a thought that goes beyond, the state does not think.

8.

Is it time, then, for philosophers to return to the city? But how could atopia be preserved? Walter Benjamin—an esoteric author, an anarchic communist, an obsessive collector, a freelance journalist, a chaotic intellectual—opened up a new pathway.

Benjamin ventured out into the metropolitan city, travelled down its tree-lined boulevards, its labyrinthine alleyways, and ended up in its one-way streets. But most importantly, he penetrated into its inner passageways, its commercial arcades, which are the temples of capital, the homeland of commodities, “the dream houses of the collective.”¹⁸

Yet, beyond travelling through the labyrinth of the city, much more is necessary—an explosive moment, almost as if throwing a bomb, to wake up the dreaming collective, to set the sleeping modernity back with its feet on the ground. The philosopher comes back into the city in order to interrupt a state of apparent wakefulness which in fact conceals a catastrophic sleepwalking. He does not limit himself to cognition and recognition; for he issues a call to action. In the age of the capitalist dream, philosophy orients itself towards a new “constellation of awakening.”¹⁹

But such awakening is not produced by Reason—an accomplice of the virulent myth of progress. It is better to put down this “whetted axe” and trust rather more in “cunning,” a dialectic able to overturn the fairy-tale world of capitalism.

The awakening does not erase the dream; rather, it introduces a new relationship. This owes to the similarity which links awakening to memory, *Erwachen* and *Erinnerung*. The experience of awakening is the entry into the suspended time between sleep and wakefulness, an inarticulate synthesis which marks a point of rupture, when everything appears in its surrealistic expression. Thus, in half-sleep—in that not-yet-conscious-knowledge—the

18. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 405.

19. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 845.

memory of that which is closest, most banal, most within reach, is suddenly turned on. This is not a matter of dreaming while awake, but of waking up to the dream. For the dream can only be remembered once one has woken up. “Carry out *what has been* in remembering of the dream!”²⁰

Just like a psychoanalyst of the collective consciousness, the philosopher makes his way through the *passages* in order to relive those dreams, summon them back into memory. By doing so, he ensures both that those who have dreamed have not done so in vain, and that those who now dream can dream again those dreams without being taken away by the torpor thereby induced. “Arcades are houses or passages having no outside—like the dream.”²¹ The philosopher does not shy from the fact that his journey is also spectral, since in travelling far and wide he may also be followed by troubled shadows, unredeemed souls, phantasms of defeat. Hence, sheer critique is not enough to implode the capitalist phantasmagoria; there also needs to be an awakening from sleep, a dialectical speculativity which reflects a beyond, a redemption of posthumous life.

Mindful of his ancient defeat, the philosopher enters back into the *pólis*, which in the meantime has become a global metropolis. He does so in order to shed light on its twilight, to illuminate its ruins. Here, there is no attempt to overcome the fracture, which remains irreparable. Far from the protection of the academy, the internal emigration becomes itinerant exile, vagabondage, lostness, distraction—but also an anarchist rereading of the architectures of the *pólis*. Philosophy returns, defeated, to seal an alliance with the defeated.

No philosopher-king, no sovereignty. That melancholic extraterrestrial wanders around the city like a fallen angel. He brings his precious saturnine gaze into the urban turmoil. He makes no claim to be watching from up on high, to raise himself up above. He does not consider himself a privileged spectator—rather, he is mixed in among the crowd; he has no bird’s eye view, but he still has his wings—however broken they are—and the memory of a dream of justice. Politically, he is an asylum-seeker in his own city. In this non-belonging, this non-citizenship, he finds himself together with many foreigners, exiles, refugees, immigrants, shoulder to shoulder with the victims of overbearing financial wealth, among the beggars and gamblers, the hawkers and the nomads, the unemployed and the desperate, the residue of the “world of dreams” that has produced horrendous nightmares.

20. Ibid., 389.

21. Ibid., 406.

Benjamin thus shows how philosophy can maintain its atopic trait even as it crisscrosses the city, everywhere inscribing the atopia of another city as it passes through galleries and alleyways, parks and basements. The philosopher thus disfigures, overthrows, sets off fuses. He excavates and recalls—recalls and excavates. He goes along deciphering a secret counter-history hidden behind the facades. He recovers that which is supposedly banal, ridiculous, disdained, condemned to obsolescence. He salvages the tradition of the oppressed, redeems the memory of the dead, and he achieves some little victories.

An eccentric inhabitant conscious of his extraneousness, he takes up residence among the homeless, the trampled-upon, the lowliest, and makes common cause with the alienated. He could be their storyteller. He never tires of speaking of the outside, of pointing to the beyond. But he is running out of breath and catastrophe is imminent. He may well *aspire*, but he will never manage to *conspire*.

The image of Socrates in the market square in dialogue with his fellow citizens has gone all blurry, become irreparably distant. This also owes to the reality that few people focus on words, and language has been de-based. Philosophy remains a killjoy—and more than ever, it is out-of-place. Benjamin imagines it as a “rag-picker,” a *Lumpensammler*. At daybreak the philosopher gathers up rags of speech, scraps of language, tossing them into his cart; a little drunk, he grumbles and growls, but not without letting these faded cotton remnants—“humanity,” “inwardness,” “absorption”—flutter derisively in the morning wind. A philosopher in the city can be a “rag-picker at the first light of day—at the dawn of the revolution.”²²

22. Walter Benjamin, “An Outsider Makes His Mark,” in *Selected Writings. Vol. II, Part 1: 1927–1930*, trans. Rodney Livingston et. al., ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 310 (trans. modified).