Genres of the Political: The Impolitical Comedy of Conflict

It is one of the many ironies of the recent success of contemporary Italian thought in the United States that the chronology of two terms have been reversed. Where today the American reader is well-aware of Italian thought’s relation to the biopolitical, an earlier theoretical apparatus has begun to gain traction, one whose ambiguity is matched only by its intrigue, which is felt immediately in questions of translation, Impolitico, translated as either the impolitical or less happily as the unpolitical or even the nonpolitical, appears to haunt recent biopolitical reflection, appearing in works such as Giorgio Agamben’s The Open and Roberto Esposito’s Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community. These extended cameos, beyond gesturing to another; earlier horizon in which the biopolitical might be inscribed, also appear to suggest a potential and future critique, not simply of the political but of the biopolitical as well.

Such an interest in the impolitical would surely surprise those who more than thirty years ago took up the term in Italy, some of whom, truth be told, were not saddened to bid it adieu. The Italian impolitical is born in 1978 with Massimo Cacciari’s reading of Thomas Mann’s Reflections of an Nonpolitical Man [Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen]. Soon after a number of thinkers in Italy began to employ the term to critique a series of features of Italian modernity, especially consumer society and the accompanying waning of the political. As the decade and twentieth century rush towards their early end with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the impolitical increasingly moves to

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the center of Italian debates as a way of thinking the end of a certain kind of political knowledge and utopia. Two key works appeared in the wake of 1989 that register these fundamental changes in the nature of the political, one of which is the book which the reader has in her hand: *Nine Thoughts of the Political* by Roberto Esposito. Here Esposito extends Cacciari's insights to deconstruct what Esposito considered to be the central terms of the political, the nine "pensieri" or thoughts that form the book's content. This accounts for the other half of the intrigue surrounding the term I noted above -- a viral quality from which few if any political terms seemed able to defend themselves. Yet in a few years time the impolitical will begin to lose its appeal among some of the same figures who earlier had promoted it. Esposito in particular, as the 1990s closes, will move on to other formulations of the impolitical, turning to immunity as a more precise way of marking the most useful features of the impolitical, eventually taking up the biopolitical paradigm in *Bìos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*. The reasons we can well imagine: the greater capacity of biopolitics to theorize changes taking place in a globalized setting (the emergence of the European Union as well as globalization enacted through the vehicle of neo-liberalism among others). In short, the biopolitics of globalization appeared to superceed the local features of the Italian impolitical.

Such a chronology raises a number of questions. Briefly, what happens when in an English-speaking context we reverse the title of Esposito's introduction to this volume to read "From the Biopolitical to the Impolitical?" What might the impolitical tell us about the biopolitical, about its fault lines and its limits? Such a genealogy might have the effect of responding to what has increasingly become clear in the wake of Italian contributions to biopolitical reflection: an inflation

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surrounding the biopolitical paradigm as well as its cognate biopower that risks turning politics repeatedly into a quarrel over the status of life. What is required instead is a genealogy that flashes backward and forward to ask after the impolitical possibilities of biopolitics, to see where the impolitical's negative critique of the political might be inserted into a debate about the status of biopolitics that continues to rage today. If I may be allowed a shorthand here for what will be my central argument in this brief introduction, a return to the impolitical gestures to a repressed interest in conflict; to the constituitive nature of conflict for the political and the political's repeated attempts to neutralize conflict. We can sense this in the recent impolitical readings offered by the Invisibile Committee and Tiqqun, where terms like insurrection and civil war are intensified to such a degree so as to block the (bio)political's attempts to neutralize them. For them, often more implicitly than explicitly, the biopolitical appears as nothing other than the latest attempt by the political to neutralize conflict.

I will return to these considerations in my conclusion but they raise an early point of access into this brief genealogy of the impolitical: conflict. Certainly, conflict serves as the center of Cacciari's reading of Nietzsche in his 1978 essay and so a brief synopsis of that essay may prove helpful. Deploying a Nietzschean will to power against Mann's timid appropriation of Nietzsche's Human, All too Human, Cacciari will make his reading of the impolitical homologous to a Nietzschean grand politics that is capable of breaking with all attempts at totalizing individuals into a larger collectives, be they socialist or democratic. For Cacciari, both socialism and democracy are

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6 If we read Mann closely, he appears to say something similar: "'Organization' -- a highly intellectual word! 'Organism -- truly a word of life! For an organism is more than the sum of its parts, and precisely this 'more' is spirit, is life. But if 'organization' ... is meant to mean enslavement of the individual by the state, state absolutism, that is, even if it is the absolutism of the Volksstaat, yes even if it is precisely this -- then down with it too!" (Mann, 203).
inscribed in a larger horizon of political theology that attempts to redeem mankind, something that Mann, with his emphasis on renunciation and asceticism also appears to propose. The result for Mann is less an impolitics than an antipolitics that is part and parcel of Mann’s cosmopolitanism. Cacciari writes: “The political for Mann is a non-value. Its dimension makes impossible the unfolding of that process which is the affirmation of the values of Humanität and Bildung of German cosmopolitanism.” Cacciari instead will read the impolitical as a mode of registering the nihilism of all values associated with the political, or what he calls more subtly politicization. In a series of deft moves, Cacciari will note how intensely the impolitical helps the political acknowledge its intrinsic nihilism:

The general theoretical significance of the unpolitical consists in the assertion of the necessity of politicization insofar as despiritualization and devaluation. Far from coinciding with Mann’s refusal of the political, the unpolitical constitutes the political’s greatest assertion within Western nihilism ... This key direction opens up, above all, by attacking the concepts, the forms, and the conducts that are the substance of the political as value.

No form of the political comes under greater scrutiny in Cacciari’s impolitical reading than democracy. For Cacciari, democracy represents the ultimate weakening of the state and hence of a certain form of the political. Under democracy, “the idea of the state is transformed into an

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7 “When one sees where France has been brought by her politicians, it seems to me one has the proof in hand that at times things do not work at all with ‘politics’; and this in turn in turn is a sort of proof that things can also work in the end without ‘politics’ ... The difference between intellect and politics includes that of culture and civilization, of soul and society, of freedom and voting rights, of art and literature; and German tradition is culture, soul, freedom, art and not civilization” (Mann, 17).

8 See Martin Heidegger’s reading of nihilism: “The question asks about the essence of nihilism. The answer is ‘that the uppermost values devalue themselves.’ We immediately perceive that in the answer there is something decisive for any understanding of nihilism: nihilism is a process, the process of devaluation, whereby the uppermost values become valueless ... When values becomes valueless, they collapse on themselves, become untenable” (Martin Heidegger, Nietzsche Volumes 1 and 2, trans. David Ferrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1991), 14).

9 Cacciari, 96.
instrument of being able to avail of one's own right." Continuing, Cacciari notes that "the mission of the democratic idea consists in the perfecting of this decay of the state, of the political as totality." And yet such a decay of state absolutism, of the state as homologous with political life, does not mean the end of the political, but instead represents "its greatest extension," what he calls "the perfection of the Politizierung": "everybody makes politics and organizes himself politically -- but only because the political has lost any aura, because it has revealed itself as devaluation and despiritualization." The results are two-fold: first, politicization multiplies heterogenous forces to the degree that any subject can be "organized" politically. As a consequence, and here we return to the principal point of this introduction, greater conflict ensues among the newly politicized. Second, in such a context of greater politicization, the state loses its aura, to appear "ultimately as a sectarian organization of arbitrary laws" (and we note the descriptor sectarian as opposed to political). When competing laws emerge in the state, "even the last spell is driven away from the idea of the political." In other words, when the state arbitrates among politicized subjects, it loses whatever sacred tie linked it to an earlier political theology. For Cacciari, democracy is really nothing more than individuals availing themselves of their rights with the support of the state.

The reader will certainly find affinities with Foucault's genealogy of the birth of biopolitics -- indeed the horizon for that birth might well be the desacralization of the political as neo-liberalism gains traction in terms of the state's ultimate function: adjudicating among interests. But we shouldn't limit Cacciari's reading merely to the diagnostic. For him, the impolitical offers the subjects of politicization the possibility of evading further politicization by showing how deeply nihilistic such

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10 Cacciari, 98.

11 Michel Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978--1979, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2010). See especially the March 28, 1979 lecture. Writing on the notion of the invisible hand in Adam Smith, Foucault notes: "This is what Adam Smith says when he writes: the common interest requires that that each knows how to interpret his own interest and is able to pursue it without obstruction. In other words, power, government, must not obstruct the interplay of individual interests."

(280).
a politicization is. Why nihilistic? Because democracy attacks the contingent and partial qualities of human beings in its attempt to totalize human beings as politicized entities; it in-validates them, that is democracy lessens their value. The response for Cacciari can only be the resistance of a subject as "an impolitical partiality" so as to evade totalization. In the closing pages of the essay, Cacciari will begin to think this impartiality through a new definition of work and worker. After attacking work as value -- "The unpolitical denounces as small politics the desperate conservation of the regressive idea of mutual universal recognition of subjects in work as value"12 -- Cacciari posits the individual not identified with the worker and hence with work as value: "The individual is the process of separation of the worker from his work -- the individual is the final product of the demythologization of the political, of his becoming democratic."13 In the individual, the impolitical find its ultimate form of resistance to the political -- the political winds up not with subjects but individuals, who by their very name, that is entitites that cannot be divided, cannot be totalized. And thus, the political contains within it a process that only ends with the impossibility of further politicization.

It is at that moment that the impolitical emerges as a way of naming a grand politics that will also be a silence that "embraces" the political's every word: a heart of resistance to the political that will be called the impolitical.14 Although often oblique, Cacciari's impolitical project might be summed up this way: a privileging of the individual who sees, as Nietzsche writes, "what is really

12 Cacciari, 101.

13 Ibid. Cacciari clearly has in mind Heidegger's discussion of value and validation: "What is a value ... Value is what validates. Only what is valid is a value. But what does 'validate' mean? What is valid plays the role of a standard of measure. The question is whether a value is valid because it is a standard of measure, or whether it can be a standard of measure because it is valid ... To be valid is a mode of Being." (Martin Heidegger, Nietzsche, 14).

14 Ibid, 102.
going on in the world" and who "takes pleasure in change and transience." Needless to say it is both a critique of political theology, the "state-lovers" as Cacciari calls them (given the year of the essay, Cacciari is surely taking aim at the Italian Communist Party) as well as secularization, which appears as political theology's double.

This hymn to the individual who cannot be captured by totalizing political projects, be they communism or liberalism, is one that many readers of Esposito's later works, will recognize. It is also one that informs Esposito's own reading of the impolitical, of which Nine Thoughts represents a signature moment, from the appropriation of Nietzsche's thought of a grand politics to the impolitical's critique of political theology. Certainly any reading of Esposito's elaboration of the impolitical would need to take account of those affinities. Yet as I noted above, a significant point of contact between Cacciari's and Esposito's impolitical concerns conflict and its relation to the impolitical. And so in the remainder of the essay I want to focus on the place of conflict in Esposito's reading before turning finally to the future of the impolitical for contemporary thought today.

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15 Ibid. Chaos is another way of describing this: "To utter anything of value about this world, he cannot push it away and avoid it. Despite all purposes and plans, it is more of a chaos than ever before, because it is moving faster and faster towards self-destruction" (Elias Canetti, "The Writer's Profession," in The Conscience of Words, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Continuum, 1979, 244). And: "He is closest to the world when he carries a chaos inside himself, yet he feels responsibility for this chaos, he does not approve of it, he does not feel at ease about it, he does not regard himself as grand for having room for so many contradictory and unconnected things, he hates the chaos, he never gives up hope of overcoming it for others and thereby for himself as well" (243-244).

16 No better account of the importance of the Italian 1968 for contemporary Italian thought can be found than Adam Sitze's in Carlo Galli's Political Spaces and Global War, ed. Adam Sitze, trans. Elisabeth Fay (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

17 See especially the last chapter of Bios in which Esposito attempts to think birth and individuation as affirmative biopolitical practices.
Where Cacciari speaks of the desacralization of the political resulting in the "autonomous multiplication of subjects," Esposito will read that multiplication in terms of conflict and the various modes by which the political attempts to neutralize conflict through representation:

No philosophy of conflict exists that does not to reduce conflict to a categorical order and therefore which does not negate conflict by trying to represent it. Thus conflict is an antinomy outside the language of political philosophy and which operates as the political's irrepre
table foundation.  

For Esposito an antinomy lies at the heart of all political philosophy: a representation of conflict that is not always an ordering of the same conflict. The impolitical for Esposito will name this antimony and obsession at the heart of the political; to attempt to represent conflict symbolically and in so doing to continue to neutralize those conflicts that threaten the political order. In short attempting to represent conflict symbolically in language has the effect of immobilizing conflict.

Esposito, especially in the opening thought on the political, will follow the trail of a philosophy of conflict from Plato to Aristotle to Freud, and again and again he returns to this question of unrepresentability. Especially in the sections related to the form of the city in Aristotle, Esposito will argue that philosophy has always attempted to found the political by representing order even or

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especially when philosophy has tried to think conflict. Conflict for philosophy is repeatedly made symbolic and as such is negated.\textsuperscript{20}

The reader will certainly want to know more about the authors who line up with Esposito’s reading of conflict; certainly Walter Benjamin comes to mind.\textsuperscript{21} To those names perhaps the most important though is Machiavelli, whom Esposito, in a series of earlier works, will read proleptically with respect to the impolitical, as central to the question of the unrepresentability of conflict for the political. Many passages from Esposito might be cited at this juncture, but one in particular stands out. Writing of Machiavelli and representation in 1984, Esposito notes: “The absolute impression of tragedy in the Machiavellian scenes emerges as represented, is capable of being represented, of being presented to the evidence that interrogates them always and only thanks to the presentness [attività] of the scenes, or even to the radical possibility of their own negation, of their own reversal, of their own otherness.”\textsuperscript{22} To the degree that political philosophy can be defined, it is because political philosophy forgets (one is tempted to say immunizes) its shared horizon with what cannot be represented, with what Esposito will repeatedly refer to as the unthought of the political: conflict. In another essay from the early 1980s, Esposito is even more explicit. Writing of Hobbes he notes:

\textsuperscript{20} See in this regard the important exchange between Cacciari and Esposito that appeared as “Politica e pensiero: Massimo Cacciari e Roberto Esposito,” in \textit{Leggere} 7 (December 1988/January 1989): 14-19. There Esposito announces that “representation negates conflict because conflict in turn negates representation ... conflict ... is the reality of the political, its facticity that cannot be eliminated. But this facticity does not appear in the represented schemes of political philosophy if not in the form of its conceptualization and therefore of its elimination” (15). The impolitical, he notes soon after, “takes on meaning thanks to its constitutive opposition to the category of representation.” Cacciari’s response, which merits greater detail than what I can provide here, focuses on the gnostic qualities of Esposito’s reading as well as the difficulties of opposing the impolitical to the political: “If one opposes the impolitical to the political, one is inevitably representing it and therefore one can define impolitical only rhetorically as unrepresentable” (18).


It is precisely this question of the compatibility of conflict and politics that is the object of Hobbes's polemic. There is either politics or there is conflict. The transition or better the jump from the natural state to that of the civil state places the division along a temporal line: when there is conflict there still is no politics. When there is politics, no longer is there any conflict.23

Where Hobbes sees conflict as neutralizable in and through politics, Machiavelli instead will see the unequal forces of the different social parts determining the "blocking of the conflictual dialectic."24 The difference between the political and the impolitical is located in the distinction between conflict that is neutralized in the political and conflict that is composed and which does not move towards an ultimate synthesis in a political ordering25; conflict understood as "the logical (and historical) primum" out of which emerges order. In Nine Thoughts, Esposito's extends his reading of conflict and order from the earlier scenes from Machiavelli across modernity and the result is to see how deeply the categories of the political are riven by their incapacity to neutralize conflict precisely by representing it. That neutralization of what Esposito will later call "political realism" -- thinking the political outside of every ethical intention and every organicistic horizon -- is what the impolitical shares with Machiavelli.26

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24 Ibid., 188.
26 It is one, we should keep in mind, from which the category of subject is not immune either. Thus Esposito writes in his introduction to Oltre la politica that "the intangibility of the principle of power as the sole law of this world, one 'realistically' recognized by all impolitical writers, is rooted in the co-existence of power with the subject, which the latter carries. There is no subject except that of power just as power in the final analysis can be ascribed to a subject be it individual or collective" (Esposito, Oltre la politica, 22).
In such a world of forces continually composed against one another, incapable of being completely neutralized, what is left for the subject of composition to do when not to neutralize? Esposito dedicates some of the most elegant pages of *Nine Thoughts* to this question to sketch a practice of the impolitical. In the chapter titled "Work" ([opera]), he joins such a practice to inoperative representation:

[T]he very same impolitical, in order to be practicable or practiceable, cannot be subtracted completely from the form of myth, but at least from its presumed objectivity. For this reason the impolitical isn’t really outside of representation; the impolitical also represents or at least represents itself. And yet representing itself, its absence of work, its inactivity, the impolitical represents the unrepresentable. Indeed: it is the "Unrepresentable." Co-belonging to action, practicing action, acting as inaction, the impolitical for a moment suspends the myth of action, that is to say its work of completion ... It is a passive action, outside of work, inoperative.\(^\text{27}\)

Esposito constructs his reading of inaction as constitutive of the impolitical, though inaction is perhaps a misnomer since inaction for Esposito is the origin of action, and not its mere contrary; a fractured origin that propels forward both meanings as constituitive of the other.\(^\text{28}\) Proper action for Esposito will be seen as the abandonment of that supposedly pure origin in action in favor of the co-presence of both action and inaction in a fractured origin (and here one will obviously hear echoes with Nancy’s inoperative community as well as Esposito’s later deconstruction of


\(^{28}\) We ought to recall as well Giorgio Agamben’s recent observations on action and impotentiality. ‘Impotentiality’ does not mean here only absence of potentiality, not being able to do, but also and above all, ‘being able not to do,’ being able to not exercise one’s own potentiality’ (Giorgio Agamben, “On What We Can Not Do,” *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 43).
communitas through immunitas). The political is incapable of representing such a coterminous origin of (in)action.  

The role that inaction plays in *Nine Thoughts* also flashes forward to Esposito's later works on the impersonal, especially the 2007 *Terza persona*. We might say that the impolitical critique of work and representation depends for much of its force on an affinity with the impersonal. This will surprise no one given what we know about the intimate relation between the political and the person, especially remembering Carl Schmitt's positing of the friend and enemy distinction as constitutive of the political: "The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy." Indeed, we might well say that the form of the person (as well as the personal) functions for Esposito as a shorthand for the political; the principal mode by which the political takes form and thus one of the fundamental ways in which conflict is represented politically. On this score the impersonal attempts to make inoperative the distinction between friend and enemy, though that by no means signifies that conflict is avoided or neutralized. In fact the point here has to be that conflict as the ultimate horizon for the political is not fully captured by the friend/enemy distinction. The conflict that is to be thought outside of all representation enjoys in Esposito's reading a relation with the impersonal to the degree the impersonal observes the permanent nature of conflict (or the permanent conflictual nature of

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29 Esposito appears here and elsewhere to be pushing Walter Benjamin's critique of violence to its limit: the law cannot subtract language from the excess of violence, but language is exactly what consigns law to violence. The resulting perspective on the impolitical sets off sparks between the word and action through a negation that negates itself and thus affirms itself. See in this regard Esposito's reading of immunity in the later pages of *Immunitas. La protezione e negazione della vita* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001).


31 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996), 6. And even more importantly: "Each participant is in a position to judge whether the adversary intends to negate his opponent's way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one's own form of existence ... Thereby the inherently objective nature and autonomy of the political becomes evident by virtue of its being able to treat, distinguish, and comprehend the friend-enemy antithesis independently of other antitheses" (27).
order); forces moving in a composed space that come together but which are not neutralized.\(^{32}\) For Esposito, such a neutralization occurs regardless of the particular name given to the "political system" in question, be it totalitarian or liberal.\(^{33}\)

The results of such a reading for our understanding of the political as a common enterprise are troubling. First a positing of the impolitical as the unnamed and fractured co-origin of the political suggests that any return to politics, to a pure and conflict-free politics is naive; even or especially one that attempts to represent conflict fully. As Esposito argues in a recent essay, picking up again the fundamentally conflictual nature of the political in the form of community, "that which is communicated in the community is its violence and the violence of community is the unlimited possibility of such a communication."\(^{34}\) What a reading today of *Nine Thoughts* makes clear is how much this perspective is indebted to Esposito’s earlier deconstruction of the political: the political, like the community, has nothing to do with the Good. Esposito instead is asking us to live with conflict or better to live conflict impersonally; to compose conflict continually not as elements to be represented (persons, friend and enemy) but rather something approaching elements of force.\(^{35}\) *Nine Thoughts of the Political* offers itself as a sketch of the enmeshment of representation in the political across a number of the later’s central “thoughts.”

\(^{32}\) Perhaps we can hear echoes of Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the culture industry: “The individual trait is reduced to the ability of the universal so completely to mold the accidental that it can be recognized as accidental ... Pseudoindividuality is a precondition for apprehending and detoxifying tragedy; only because individuals are none but mere intersections of universal tendencies is it possible to reabsorb them smoothly into the universal” (Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 125).

\(^{33}\) See Esposito’s recent critique of the biopolitics of totalitarianism: “Totalitarianism or Biopolitics: Concerning a Philosophical Interpretation of the 20th Century;” in *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 4 (Summer 2008): 633-645.

\(^{34}\) Comunità e violenza,” in *Dieci Pensieri*, 254.

\(^{35}\) Thus Aristotle: “Now there are three degrees of composition; and of these the first in order, as all will allow, is composition out of what some call the elements, such as air, water, fire. Perhaps, however, it would be more accurate to say composition out of the elementary forces ...” (Aristotle, "De Partibus Animalum," *The Works of Aristotle*, Vol. 5, eds. J.A. Smith and W.D. Ross (Oxford At the Clarendon Press, 1912), 645).
Admittedly, we might describe such a perspective on the political as tragic, which isn’t surprising either, given that the problem of representation originates with the tragic form as Walter Benjamin argues.” And yet tragedy isn’t the only possible genre in which to inscribe the impolitical. There is also the possibility of reversing the tragic, which following Benjamin’s reflections on tragedy and comedy in “Fate and Character” will begin when the concept of character (or the political for my purposes) divests itself “of those features that constitute its erroneous connection to that of fate.” Benjamin continues: “This connection is established through the notion of a net that can be tightened by knowledge as its will into the firmest weave.” If we were to translate Benjamin’s considerations into the problem of representation for the political, we might say that the political, in attempting to represent conflict, continually tightens order; weaving the net in such a way that the space between conflict and order becomes harder and harder to discern. It is there that the fate of the political will be measured tragically.

However, Benjamin affirms another possibility for character that declines differently from the tragic figure:

While fate brings to light the immense complexity of the guilty person, the complications and bonds of his guilt, character gives this mystical enslavement of the person to the guilt context the answer of genius. Complication becomes simplicity, and fate freedom. For the character of the comic figure is not the scarecrow of the determinist; it is the beacon in whose beams the freedom of his actions becomes visible.37

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36 “There is therefore a concept of fate -- and it is the genuine concept, the only one that embraces equally fate in tragedy and the intentions of the fortuneteller; that is completely independent of concept of character; having its foundation in an entirely different sphere” (Walter Benjamin, “Fate and Character,” in Selected Works Volume 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 204.

37 Ibid., 205-206.
By holding open the interval between the saying and the naming, the weave of the net loosens, however slightly, opening up spaces in which the freedom to act and not act, rather than only action "becomes visible."\textsuperscript{38} Along these lines I would suggest that the comic provides the means for acknowledging in lieu of knowing and so creates possibilities not captured by the political. Thought differently: the comic figure does not move in terms of a fated order but offers a space in which previously unthought actions become thinkable. For Esposito in his impolitical as well as biopolitical stages, the comic figure of the impolitical becomes visible in writing, not in terms of a philosophy in service of a politics, but a writing that makes visible "the freedom of actions" in any given "political" moment.

Such a move to the comic opens up other avenues for thinking political thought outside of the tragic form and raises a question, one of the most significant generated by Esposito's reading of the impolitical. How might we employ the impolitical to think through the possibility of "non-tragic conflict?" The fact that conflict today is continually qualified as tragic suggests an inability on the part of political philosophy (though not only) to countenance what a non-tragic conflict might look like.\textsuperscript{39} Esposito's reading of the impolitical provides us with another possibility when faced with conflict: to avoid naming conflict immediately as tragic and by so doing to open ourselves to conflict. An impolitical comedy asks us to wait before qualifying conflict; asks us to forestall

\textsuperscript{38} "Naming grasps not the truly real, but functions, relationships, and beings which only in their relation prove to be conceivable. Thus each name gathers in itself more or fewer of the other names; it is intrinsically mediation with the other from itself" (Massimo Cacciari, "The Problem of Representation," in Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 160). Cf. Agamben’s perspective on genius: "To some extent we all come to terms with Genius, with what resides in us but does not belong to us. Each person’s character is engendered by the way he attempts to turn away from Genius, to flee from him" (Giorgio Agamben, "Genius," in Profanations, trans. Jeffrey Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 17).

\textsuperscript{39} I am deeply indebted to Adam Sitze for much of my reading of comedy and non-tragic conflict that follows. See in particular his views of the relation of serious play to anti-tragic poetry in Plato’s \textit{Laws}: “It [\textit{Laws}] famously construes man … as the plaything … of the gods. And perhaps most importantly for our purposes, it owes its very form as anti-tragic poetry to its break with the ‘seriousness’ (σπουδαίων/spoudaien) that, at least according to the Stranger, is the hallmark of tragic poetry” (Adam Sitze, “Nomos as a Problem for Disciplinary Reason,” English Language Notes 48.2 (Fall/Winter 2010), 168).
determining ahead of time the nature of the conflict so as to stop conflict precisely from spreading (which suggests in turn that narratives of contamination are not tragic initially, but only become so after those who have been contaminated are viewed as somehow “guilty”). Giorgio Agamben, writing apropos of Dante in The End of the Poem, is helpful on this score when he observes that “insofar as it is a ‘comedy,’ the poem [Dante’s Divine Comedy] is, in other words, an itinerary from guilt to innocence and not from innocence to guilt.” He goes on to write that “tragedy appears as the guilt of the just and comedy as the justification of the guilty.” Translating Agamben’s insight into impolitical terms then, impolitical comedy justifies our own guilt to the degree that it shows us how deeply attached we are to representing conflict; how efficiently we identify conflict in personal and hence political terms. But as any good comedy does, the impolitical comedy makes it possible to detach ourselves from representing conflict in these terms. Once we begin to sense how easily representation leads down the path of tragedy, we can begin to identify less with this or for that matter any representation of the political. Such a possibility is intimately linked with that other element that appears across Nine Thoughts and continues today in Esposito’s recent Terza persona and Pensiero vivente, namely the place of the impersonal. The impersonal is at the heart of impolitical comedy in the same way that it is at the heart of Esposito’s affirmative biopolitics since the impersonal attempts to block any identification with tragic conflict.

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42 In the same essay mentioned above, Agamben, speaking of person and comedy, notes that “the Stoic critique of tragedy is developed through the metaphor of the actor, in which human life appears as a dramatic performance and men are presented as actors to whom a part (a prosopon, a mask) has been assigned. For the Stoics, what is tragic is not the mask in itself but the attitude, whether of attracting or repulsion, of the actor who identifies with it” (Agamben, The End of the Poem, 17). Thus, the impersonal works to clear up any confusion between mask and character and hence disentangles person from tragic conflict. See Esposito’s forthcoming essay “The Dispositif of the Person” for a fuller accounting of the relation among the impersonal, the personal, and biopolitics.
The impolitical’s turn to the comic in Esposito as well as to a certain degree in some of Agamben’s earlier work raises the possibility that today’s success of Italian thought in the works of Antonio Negri, Franco Berardi, Paolo Virno, Adriana Caverero, Rosi Braidotti and others rests on some feature of Italian culture intimately linked to the comic.\(^{43}\) Certainly, Virno’s recent work on humor and wit as well as Negri and Hardt’s work on fluid common subjectivizations suggests comedic elements.\(^{44}\) Cavarero’s feminist philosophy of difference linked to relationality and not semblance would short-circuit representation as well, while we can hear in Braidotti’s “nomadic subjects” and “nomadic ethics” a similar comedic tonality.\(^{45}\) Contemporary Italian thought’s relation to the comedic also highlights the importance of laughter and the comedic that might have escaped us to this point. “Laughter,” as Elias Canetti reminds us, “has been objected to as vulgar; because, in laughing, the mouth is opened wide and the teeth are shown. Originally laughter contained a feeling of pleasure in prey or food which seemed certain. A human being who falls down reminds us of an animal we might have hunted and brought down ourselves. Every sudden fall which arouses laughter does so because it suggests helplessness and reminds us that the fallen can, if we want, be treated as prey. If we went and actually ate it, we would not laugh.”\(^{46}\) Canetti’s reading points to another facet of the comedic in the impolitical. In laughter we find something like an acknowledgment of the possibility of tragedy as well as a failure to identify with it; of laughing in

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\(^{43}\) When speaking of the opening of the *Divine Comedy*, Agamben writes “here, for the first time, we find one of the traits that most tenaciously characterizes Italian culture: its essential pertinence to the comic sphere and consequent refutation of tragedy” (Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, 1).

\(^{44}\) The comedic elements are especially on display in the Hardt and Negri’s recent *Commonwealth* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009). For Virno, see his reading of jokes in Part 2 of *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*, trans. Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007).


lieu of eating or what Canetti will refer to as incorporation or seizing. The political as tragedy involves incorporation while not admitting that we are all the potential prey of others; that our status as possible prey makes us guilty in relation to one another. The impolitical admits such a possibility and by so doing attempts to keep incorporation at bay (through jokes, witty remarks, jesting). Impolitical comedy in this sense plays the always underweight court jester to tragedy’s gluttonous king.  

At this juncture we can now mark more clearly the difficulties of linking too tightly political philosophy to tragedy. When Alain Badiou, for instance, encourages a $\alpha$-series subject in his reading of *The Eumenides* and argues that the play teaches us about “the recomposition of a different order” or that “against the limitlessness of the old rule, it is a matter of engendering the new, and of deciding the conflict,” we might be observe how often such decisions about conflict not only occlude “an engendering of the new,” but in fact neutralize the very conflict under cover of “deciding it.” Or when Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler spar over over the status of Antigone as either representing the complete reconfiguration of the symbolic order (Žižek) or as representing a possible practice of performative reconfiguration (Butler), we might note how both privilege a tightly woven narrative of politics and tragedy that keeps at bay a different reading, not of Antigone – indeed to continue to read Antigone in these terms may be precisely what is not required -- but of other non-tragedies. In other words, how might our reading of rupture, peformance, and desire change if the text under discussion were not Aeschylus but Aristophanes say? In what ways do

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47 Or perhaps the trickster: “Nothing demonstrates the meaning of the all-controlling social order more impressively than the religious recognition of that which evades this order; in a figure who is the exponent and personification of the life of the body…. Disorder belongs to the totality of life, and the spirit of this disorder is the trickster. His function is … to add disorder to order and so make a whole, to render possible, within the fixed bounds of what is permitted, an experience of what is not permitted” (Karl Kerényi, “The Trickster in Relation to Greek Mythology,” in *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, ed. Paul Radin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 185).

comedies of conflict differ from their tragic counterparts? Certainly not in terms of violence as any reader of *The Clouds* or *The Frogs* knows (the lack of any reference to the personal in their titles already suggests an impersonal motif). Esposito’s *Nine Thoughts* invites us to consider the advantages of a change in genre for thinking the unthought of the political.

With this admittedly brief survey of the impolitical in *Nine Thoughts* complete, I would like to return to the biopolitical and ask what an impolitical critique of the biopolitical looks like? First, it seems to me that the impolitical would attempt to reintroduce conflict into the heart of biopower, allowing us to register how the force of biopower resides precisely in a capacity to neutralize conflict by representing conflict in terms of life and life alone. We see this in the emphasis biopolitical reflection places on the naturalized form-of-life, *zoe*, which in being shorn of political attributes in fact politicizes that form of life further; the lack of political attributes (or the emphasis on the potentiality of *zoe*) replaces other possible forms-of-life. Indeed *Nine Thoughts* helps us to locate one of the roots of biopower in the ease with which representations of *zoe* might well neutralize conflict. And so when Agamben extends *homo sacer* to vast populations as the emerging and future form-of-life, he implicitly denies the possibility that other forms-of-life may result when representation is refused or simply delayed. Refusing representation, the comic figure of the impolitical (subject, individual however we may wish to call it) appears when forms-of-life are not

49 "Under the guise of a biopolitical reflection, what we have is rather a biological and naturalizing understanding of life that strips it of all political power. Life is reduced, at best, to a heap of flesh and bones. Up to what point does Heideggerian ontology find an essential and tragic resource in this passage from *Zoe* to *Bios*?" (Antonio Negri, *The Porcelain Workshop: For a New Grammar of Politics*, trans. Noura Wedell (New York: The MIT Press, 2008), 33). Negri’s description of life as consisting of a ‘great ambiguity’ evokes a recent editorial in the journal *Nature* on synthetic biology: “Synthetic biology’s view of life as a molecular process lacking moral thresholds at the level of the cell is a powerful one. And it can and perhaps should be invoked to challenge characterizations of life that are sometimes used to defend religious dogma about the embryo ... The point is to recognize that the formation of a new being is gradual, contingent and precarious, then the role of the term life in that debate might acquire the ambiguity that it has always warranted.” “Meanings of ‘Life,’” *Nature* 447, no. 7148 (28 June 2007), 1032.
named. In this way they give way to partialities, the whatever of the more impolitical and less biopolitical Agamben of *The Coming Community* and the more recent *Nudities*.⁵⁰

Second, as I noted above, some have returned recently to the impolitical, drawing on it in their calls for "the coming insurrection" or even "civil war." These calls, however, are unsatisfactory to the degree they forget how easily neutralization follows upon representation; how easily the political (or negative biopolitics) appropriate especially terms like civil war, insurrection, and anarchy. To be fair Tiqqun’s tactics of anonymity and the impersonal are a step in the right direction, but they remain too inscribed in the political horizon of ordered conflict. As Cacciari notes in his dialogue with Esposito, an unreconstituted discord cannot be uttered philosophically, except as stasis or civil war and my impression is that often recent attempts to articulate such discord move away from civil war to something else: for the moment let’s call it communism.⁵¹ What these accounts miss, therefore, is a greater recognition of the impolitical as a practice and here I would simply draw the reader’s attention to play as a privileged practice of the comic. A play among forms-of-life, a continual composition among forms, would be one impolitical response to contemporary biopower; would be on some level a response to the fracture between bios and zoe on which the entire dispositif of biopolitics is premised since it would attempt to hold open (and hold off) any move to represent conflict and thus to neutralize it through biopolitics.⁵² Such a perspective also suggests that if an affirmative biopolitics is to be up to the demands of meeting biopower, then it must contest the reduction of forms of life to bios or zoe.

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⁵¹ Massimo Cacciari and Roberto Esposito, "Politica e pensiero," 18.

⁵² I discuss play and attention as possible counterpractices to biopower in Improper Life: Thanatopolitics from Heidegger to Agamben (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). On the notion of play, not thought in terms of the comedic but of the sacred, see Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993) as well as “In Praise of Profanation,” in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone, 2007): “This means that play frees and distracts humanity from the sphere of the sacred, without simply abolishing it. The use to which the sacred is returned is a special one that does not coincide with utilitarian consumption (76).
What form might that contestation take? In the recently published lectures *The Government of Self and Others* at the Collège de France from 1982-1983, Foucault returns to the question of politics and philosophy and notes that “the relationship of philosophy to politics ... will not take the form of an imperative discourse in which men and the city will be given constraining forms to which they must submit for the city to survive." Rather, "the reality of philosophy is to be found in its practices, which are the practices of the self on self and at the same time, those practices of knowledge by which all modes of knowledge ... finally bring one face to face with the reality of Being itself." Foucault counterposes political survival to practices of the self. If we were to read Foucault less biopolitically and more impolitically, we might say that the "reality of Being" escapes the strictures of political representation; an impolitical mode of knowledge is one that acknowledges an unrepresentable conflict at the heart of the political and works to hold open the self for forms of life that continually shift, apart from the horizon of the city (the political) or survival (the biopolitical). To think the nature of such practices in a regime of biopower is certainly daunting since it requires us to think outside the transcendental of representation and "imperative discourse"; to imagine without security what the biopolitical is incapable of representing. That would mean at the very least not having immediate recourse to a project of self-preservation or common property.

Those coming to the impolitical for easy answers to politics and now biopolitics or looking for a banner on which to hang their hopes and fears will likely be disappointed. And yet the impolitical does move us towards new spaces from which we might be able to see how quickly the political nullifies conflict, suggesting in turn that if today's discussions of biopolitics impress with their totalizing effects, that may have less to do with the category of bios than it does with the

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other lemme, politikos. In an inflationary context of biopolitics, the impolitical might allow for the unexpected in a regime of knowing in which horizons open for sundry forms of life; a thought experiment whose goal would be of "creating possibles" for forms of life. That may well be the sum of the Nine Thoughts of the political you are about to read: nine impolitical thoughts adding up to a comedy of bios.

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54 "A thought experiment can never claim to be able to constitute a program that would simply need to be put into application. With respect to scientific practices -- as elsewhere -- such experiments have never had any role other than that of creating possibles, that is of making visible the directives, evidences, and rejections that those possibles must question before they themselves become perceptible" (Isabelle Singers, Cosmopolitics, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 13).