

# HERMENEUCRACY

## SHORT INTERVIEW ON INTERNATIONALISM AND INTERPRETATION



JEAN-LUC NANCY

**Frédéric Neyrat:** In order to imagine a recovery, a revival of internationalism, understood as the rejection of nationalist regression, a demand to not hold onto the borders of the nation nor to the borders of any identity, from what would we need to set out again? From the question of the nation, that is, the question of place and of fixity in place (ought we rather think in terms of country, or of world, or of Earth), or from the question of the prefix, of the inter- [*l'inter*] (of the between [*l'entre*] and of that which takes place “in the midst of” [*au-milieu-de*], and with)? Unless the whole problem is precisely to rethink, contest and redefine, both fixation and the prefix...

**Jean-Luc Nancy:** The nation has been, in effect, largely constructed on the basis of place. For that matter, the people has previously been largely local as well as ethnic, cultural, linguistic. The current conditions of mobility, as much conquered (travel, etc.) as constrained (distance from workplaces, migrations) have made locality much more fragile. There are, however, some neighborly localities in living places, and localities of companionship in workplaces. They are complex, even contradictory, penetrated by rupturing tensions between cultural, religious, etc., belongings...

The local has perhaps no more consistency than the microcosmic – which is certainly not negligible – but not the macrocosmic (in the sense of politics, of culture). But the country, as a linguistic, customary, and emotive entity, remains a given that resists the forces of “microcosmicization.” The country and, partially, the region as well, in the sense of internal divisions of countries of medium (France) or large (China) size.

Thus, the local is today caught in a strong elasticity or plasticity – for which a strong bond with time is a component: in all senses, it is nothing more than evolutions, transformations, displacements... Is it possible to think in terms of space-time? of perpetual instability? it seems that the question is already taken away and ready to be displaced... To think in terms of “here-now” and after we’ll see...? This is what comes to pass everywhere that parents (and grandparents) have children (and relatives [collatéraux<sup>1</sup>]) all over the world.

This is why, to me, the nation seems like a weak reference [point]. “Rejection of nationalist regression:” I fear that this negative motivation is insufficient; while nationalisms are in advance such a constraint on global interdependence that they only have a fleeting power today (this global interdependence is itself articulated in different ensembles, which are themselves in part local in the continental or subcontinental scale).

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<sup>1</sup> *Collatéraux* can refer both to familial relations (beyond the nuclear family) and to collateral wealth.

Of course, nationalisms have a force that clings to what remains around a well-established tracing [*repérage*] (people, language, history) but, at the same time, it is precisely this tracing that is becoming blurred.

“Internationalism” seems to me like too dated a term. It entailed, with the nation, the representation of another belonging, that of class. But this is fading in favor of something else, that is poverty and social precarity: these have nothing to recognize themselves by from a global standpoint or from narrower standpoints. They do not correspond simply to positions within the apparatus of production. Production no longer allows its analysis in terms of means and ownership of means. It is rather an end which self-determines and therefore determines its means and their ownership on the basis of a general logic of calculation both technical and financial. In a sense, there is no longer clearly determined ownership which could change hands: there are no longer hands but a giant self-regulated (which is to say, self-crazed [*autoaffolée*]) machinery.

What is in play is production itself, not its means. (As for its ends, they are, as I have said, both self-determined and crazed.)

The only possible transversal union would be that of unproductivity. Substituted by creativity... It would be necessary to rally the creators against the producers. Alas, the word “creator” has been seized by the producers of fashion or design... What should we say? Animator,

initiator, interpreter, imaginer, player? Finally, and for today, I prefer “interpreter:” the interpreters against the producers.

“To interpret” is to make sense in abundance, it is to draw out useless shards and meteors, to send them to each other without trying to master anything, letting oneself interpret in turn and fly away in the whirlwind of existences. And it can also do justice, that sense [*sens*] beyond meanings [*significations*].

Let us keep the music:

Stand up, you ridiculous poets,  
Stand up, you piteous philosophers!  
Passion ripens in history,  
So, let’s pluck its sumptuous fruits.

This is the infinite feast  
Comrades come rally and tomorrow  
From the world in ferment the genius  
Will be the human race!

**FN:** Since you are proposing a new interpretation of the Internationale, this allows me to understand – in every sense [*sens*] – that, as for the idea of a new internationalism, it would be a question of first substituting a new interpretation. And, who knows, a new inter-pret [*inter-prêt*], another economy, of gift and counter-gift [*contre-don*], of sense and

counter-sense [*contre-sens*], if I may. And, since this is about interpreting before transforming, or transformation in the guise of interpretation, it is hard for me not to think of a famous thesis of Marx's, which I give you thus translated, not without some stunning intention: the world has been transformed only too much, it is now a question of inter-pret[ing] [*l'inter-prêter*] it. What do you think of this interpretation?

**JLN:** I cannot believe it! You have made me search for the etymology of “interpret” and I discovered that the Latin *interpres* is, first of all, an intermediary financier, a broker. The word would be formed from a root which would correspond to *pretium*, price. It is thus a matter of estimating a value, of evaluating a meaning [*sens*]. With “*prêter*” you introduce another value: that of “to make available” [*mettre à disposition*]. We can lend our shoulder [*prêter son épaule*] and we can lend fifty euros, we can lend our ears [*prêter attention*] or lend a hand. The disposition, for its part, is a certain compromise/transaction, a favorable arrangement: we are disposed to discuss, to transact. In the reverse sense, we dispose of means, of time.

To interpret is to be disposed or to ready oneself to find some sense [*sens*] or some value (this is almost the same thing). Internationalism supposed at least some communicable sense between nations, at most a complete devalorization of them. Because the proletariat – or the entirety of humanity – had a sense and a value that was incommensurable with the nation.

To move to interpretationism signifies [*signifie*], on the one hand, that it is not necessary to refer to nations (they are at least secondary, at most indifferent) and, on the other hand, that a transnational unity of sense or of value (that of the proletariat or the general equivalence of money, or a given model of “humanity”) is no longer given; it means, on the contrary, being ready to give and receive, to make available [*mettre à disposition*] some senses [*des sens*] and some values that no equivalence is permitted to measure.

We are always closest to the spirit of Marx, but far from the letter, because he had written: “*die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert* [rightly, he employed the word of Latin stock, not a Germanic word]; *es kommt drauf an, sie zu verändern.*”<sup>2</sup> It must be amended: “Philosophers have done nothing but evaluate the world in various ways; the point, at present, is to transform the world in a general space of interpretation of all among all.”

To interpret one another is only to make ourselves fully what we are: talking animals. As soon as the animal speaks, it says “here I am, I make sense [*je fais sens*], my sense is available [*est à disposition*]” – and the other responds that it feels [*sent*] good, or bad, to it...

The problem of our civilization is really to have believed we can render everything equivalent in furnishing [*mettant à disposition*] a means of

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<sup>2</sup> “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”

converting all our values into only one, which we call money. But everything that we interpret in money always has the same sense [sens]. The only variation possible is in quantity. If we allowed our senses and our values to vary, according to the diversity of our dispositions, that would have another allure!

Always keep the music – it is enough to interpret

(Orchestra readying [*se dispose*], pan flutes, tam-tam, oboe d'amour,  
krakeb, guimbard, harpsichord)

Stand up, you notoriously indisposed!

Stand up, you libidinal investors!

Sense seethes in history

Let us taste its frothy spew.

Wise interpreters

Let us gloss and tomorrow

The talkative peoples

Will be the human race!

**FN:** Allowing our senses and our values to vary freely could evoke the economic event of 1971, when the dollar's convertibility into gold was suspended, the regime of currency exchanges was then "floating." But what you are proposing, with this "general space of interpretation of all between all," is not the return to some sort of stability, to some kind of



material anchoring in gold or indeed in the nation, but rather to turn to that which has been, shall I say, abused [*malmené*] by and in this ontological liberation in the guise of finance into something beneficial. The generalized space of interpretation would be, then, a first name for designating the venue for the reception of the abused ontological liberation. How are we to characterize this first name again, how are we to translate it? There, where internationalism was still in need of the nation, the space of generalized interpretation is the farewell given to the nation as well as its overcoming [*dépassement*]: is it a global or planetary space? Is it the space-time of a communism of the ontological liberation? Or a democracy of interpreters, a sort of hermenocracy?

**JLN:** Hermeneucracy would be more just: I believe that you've let yourself get carried away by the o of demo-, aristo-, pluto-, etc.... But, apart from that, which kind of cracy is at issue? It is the power to make sense, which at times is immense, possibly unlimited, and without means of imposing itself. The hermeneut does not decipher a hidden meaning [*sens*]: it births a meaning that is new each time and proper to its channeler's diction (recall Ion!). The hidden meaning is so well hidden that it is forever crossed out...

You make a sense that I can return or return to you, to adopt or to revoke... and all these operations proliferate the extraordinary, anarchic and proliferating abundance of sense of which humanity is made.

The only condition is to not pose any ultimate sense, neither a single truth of sense nor of senses. To know that if I say “God,” a thousand senses rush and splash between us, the same as if say “man,” etc. – and the same if I say “interpretation” itself as if it is the last word! No, it is the word of the not-the-last-word.

Our age is very well prepared for this. We know that not a single meaning [*signification*] remains stable and identical to itself. It is the benefit, it has to be acknowledged, that in capitalism everything has its price – it teaches us in a blow that money is worth nothing, thus inciting us to value no other thing (like gold which would be in itself absolutely precious and non-negotiable) but the possibility that all sources of meaning [*sens*] (whichever, a work, an encounter...) to be valued absolutely in regard to other values, themselves also absolute, but between themselves incommensurable and, hence, unexchangeable.

The languages are all equal in the irreducibility of their idiosyncrasy; none is indefinitely interpretable in its radical self-possession.

We know now that inequivalence must be absolute. Not merely “all is valued” [*“tout se vaut”*] but “value all that remains incommensurable.”

The music, once more, interpreted by the haphazard choirs

Stand up, you sinister nihilists,  
Stand up, you cynics of the market!

Value sounds its sistrum,  
May each seek for himself.

Beautiful hermeneucracy,  
Make each to value well  
According to the ideo-cracy  
Of the whole human race!

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Translation: Ciarán Coyle