

Gerasimos Kakoliris, “Being-in-common, thinking-in-common”

Dear all,

We would like to welcome you to the conference and to thank you for being here. Some of you had to come from far away. So we are very happy that this conference takes place thanks to your participation, help and kindness. We would like to thank in particular Professor Jean-Luc Nancy who, from the very start, was very positive about the possibility of such a conference, providing us with all possible help and encouragement. So, a conference in Athens on Jean-Luc Nancy’s thought has finally become possible because of all of you.

As you probably know, the word “conference”, which was introduced in the English language around the 16th century, stems from the French verb *conférer*, which means “to give, to converse, to compare”. In its turn, the French *conférer* stems from the compound Latin verb *confere* (*com*=“together”+*ferre*=“to bear”), which remarkably means “**to bring together**”. So, we are brought here together by Jean Luc Nancy’s thought in order to think, to speak, to converse about this thought. An exceptional quality of this thought is that it has constituted for the last 35 years the most profound deliberation of what this “bringing together” possibly means.

Nancy has made it possible for us to raise the question about the condition of possibility of this “bringing together”, as it is the case of a conference. The sharing or the communication of works that takes place in a conference, like ours, gives voice to a being-in-common. Alternatively, the being-in-common that we are gets manifested in the sharing or the communication of works. Yet, we should be careful. The being-in-common that Nancy has written so much about is not a product of the sharing of works or the communication of works, so that it might be possible to speak of a being-in-common, a community or a society that would be the result of a thinker’s works, as is the case, for

example, with the Aristotelian Society. The being-in-common does not refer to a community created through writing and the communication of this writing or its sharing. Hence, although it would not be wrong to say, as I already said, that “we are brought together here by Jean Luc Nancy’s thought”, we would overlook a very important parameter of this thought if we did not delve a bit more into it before being able to speak of our conference as the “bringing together” of a community of readers and commentators constituted by Nancy’s work.

For Nancy, there is something more profound that brings us together here than the work of a thinker. As he says: “It is not because there is literature that there is community”. There are texts, speeches, conferences because there is community. As he reminds us: “The most solitary of writers writes for the other”. In order to add immediately afterwards: “To write for others means in reality to write because of others”. In this sense, in every work, in every text, in every speech there is inscribed a certain being-in-common, a certain being for others and through others. Each text, written or spoken, strives toward address, understanding and conversation.

A multiple sharing is inscribed in every text. As Nancy notes: “‘Text’ means the being-in-common of what has no common origin, but is originally in-common or with” (91). Every work is singular but at the same time is common. In speaking or in writing, existences are offered in their singularity. The characteristics of each singular being contribute to the system of a shared life, where nothing remains within a singular limit, where, on the contrary, everything is communicated and set forth for identification.

Nancy speaks of “literary communism”, to which “belongs anyone who writes or reads by exposing himself or herself” to singular others. We would not write, speak or discuss if our being were not shared. When we write or speak we are shared being-in-common, or else we are shared, exposed. Every

writing, every speech, inaugurates a forward movement along the line that divides each one of us. But as Nancy underlines, the inaugural act of transgression towards singular others that each speech performs “founds nothing”. In his own words: “No history of community is engendered by it”. Community is formed by an articulation of “particularities”. It does not have any autonomous essence that subsists by itself and reabsorbs or assumes singular beings into itself. Community is not a form of a common being that would pre-exist singular beings, but a being *in common* of singular beings. This being-in-common is essential to singular beings. Singular beings are what they are to the extent that they are articulated upon one another, to the extent that “they are spread out and shared, touching each other without fusing together”. This condition means that “singular beings are ends for one another”. Yet this play between them does not form into a substance or the higher power of a Whole. As Nancy says, “here *the totality is itself the play* of the articulations [...]. This is why the whole of singularities, which is indeed a whole, does not close in around the singularities to elevate them to its power: this whole is essentially the opening of singularities in their articulations”.

The “bringing together” that a conference exhibits stems from the singular relationship between singular beings. A conference *is* the singular relationship between singular beings. The voice of each one of us participating in this conference, as in any conference, is a singular voice. A speaker or a writer is a singular voice, a resolutely and irreducibly singular voice, *in common*. Every singular voice is a voice *in common*. As Nancy writes: “one can never be a voice (‘a writing’) but *in common*”. The experience of speech, as much as the experience of writing, is a “communist” experience. The same also holds for the person listening or reading. Each one of us exposed to the other as a listener or a reader is a singular listener or reader. Therefore, the “gathering together” of a conference is not a melting together, but a communication between singular beings, who are, by virtue of their being, *in*

common. Communication takes place on our common limits where we are exposed to one another, to an infinity of singularities.

Yet, while the work is offered up to the infinite communication of community, it gets unworked. There is the un-working of the works of individuals in the community. What is exposed in the work, or through the work is not a definite fixed something. The sharing that gives us the work dissolves it at the same time. That the work must be offered up for communication means that it must be presented, proposed, and abandoned on the common limit where singular beings share one another. The work, as soon as it becomes a work, at the moment of its completion must be abandoned at this limit. The inscription of a community in the work safeguards it from close confinement to itself and death. A work characterized by speechless immanence would be given immediately to death. It is being-in-common which makes a work capable of survival by transcending itself. In this sense, a work never closes itself up on itself. It is always conditioned by *differance*. A work is indefinitely and constitutively deferred and different from itself.

Each one of us, in his or her own singularity, is here today due to the call of the resolutely and irreducibly singular voice-in-common of Nancy's work. Yet each one of us perceives this voice differently, according to his or her own singularity. A singular relationship has developed between Nancy's work and each one of us. This experience of infinite possible singular interpretations, commentaries, developments of it has brought us here today to share them or to be shared by them. So, fortunately for it (and for us) there is no organic community of Nancy's work because this work, as any other work, gets incessantly unworked thanks to its being-in-common.

It is this infinite unworking that keeps it not only surviving but also flourishing. It is by not being identical with itself, closed upon itself, by having its being beyond itself, that a work can survive. A work survives as far as it does not

have a fixed identity, as far as it differs from itself. In this sense, contamination by the other is inscribed in a work's being from the beginning as its condition of possibility (and impossibility as something being immanent, closed upon itself). All these also hold for us as the recipients of a work. This unworking of ourselves takes place in each of us in a singular way due to our being as being-in-common.

Finally, on behalf of the University of Athens, the French Institute of Greece and the University of Bordeaux-Montaigne, we would like to wish you a very enjoyable and rewarding time during the Conference.