Immunization and Violence
by Roberto Esposito

1. In a text dedicated to Kant as interpreter of the Enlightenment, Michel Foucault locates the task of contemporary philosophy in a precise stance. It concerns that taut and acute relation with the present that he names the "ontology of the actual." How are we to understand the phrase? What does it mean to situate philosophy in the point or on the line in which the actual is revealed in the density of its own historical being? What does an ontology of the actual mean, properly speaking? The expression alludes above all to a change in perspective with regard to ourselves. To be in relation ontologically with the actual means to think modernity no longer as an epoch between others, but as a stance, a posture, a will to see one's own present as a task. There is in this choice, something -- let's call it a tension, an impulse -- that Foucault will call an éthos, which moves even beyond the Hegelian definition of philosophy as the proper time spent in thought, because it makes of thought the lever that lifts the present out of a linear continuity with time, keeping it suspended between deciding what we are and what we can become. Already in the case of Kant his support of the Enlightenment didn't signify only remaining faithful to certain ideas, affirming the autonomy of man, but above all in activating a permanent critique of the present, not abandoning it in favor of an unattainable utopia, but inverting the notion of the possible that is contained within it, making it the key for a different reading of reality.

This is the task of philosophy as the ontology of the actual: while on the level of analysis, locating the difference between that which is essential and that which is contingent, between superficial effects and profound dynamics that move things, that transform lives and that mark existences. We are concerned here with the moment, the critical threshold, from which today's news [cronaca] takes on the breadth of history. That which is placed in being is an underlying question of the meaning of what we call "today." What does today mean generally? What characterizes it essentially, which is to say, what characterizes its effectivity, its contradictions, its potentialities? But this question doesn't exhaust the task of the ontology of the actual. It isn't anything other than the condition for asking another question, this time that has the form of a choice and a decision. What of the present does thought need to assume as given and what else, that is what other latent possibilities, can be released? What is the part of the present with which to align oneself, for which one takes a risk, on which one places one's bets? Because thought mustn't be limited only to describing that which is -- the lines of force that traverse our age [tempo] -- but rather has to identify in our actuality the epicenter of a comparison and a conflict between different perspectives that differ and are juxtaposed within which actuality is situated. Thought is situated, is always situated on the moving border between inside and outside, between process and event, between the real and the possible. This border, this limit, this front line is the same site of philosophy; its horizon of meaning and its contemporary destiny.

My work over the years was born here from this question and choice. It concerns the attempt, anything but easy, of locating the key words and the paradigms around which the coordinates of a certain historical moment can be structured, even if they are not in a form that the naked eye can always see. This, at least, is the question with which I began and to which I attempt to respond: what are the conflicts, the traumas, the nightmares -- but also the demands, the hopes -- that characterize so our age so profoundly? For my part I believe I've sketched this key word, this general paradigm in the category of immunity and immunization. What do they mean? We all know that in bio-medical language one understands by immunity a form of exemption or protection with regard to an infection; while in the juridical lexicon it represents a sort of safeguard that makes one untouchable with respect to common law. In both cases, therefore, immunization alludes to a particular situation that keeps someone safe from the risks to which he or she is exposed (and to which the entire community is exposed). Here is delineated beforehand that underlying opposition between community and immunity from which my recent reflections are born. Without being able to linger over the details of complex etymological questions, let's say that immunity or in its Latin formulation, immunitas, emerges as the contrary, the reverse of communitas. Both words derive from the term munus that signifies "gift," "office," and "obligation," but one, the communitas has a affirmative meaning while the other, immunitas, is negative. Thus, if the members of a community are characterized by this donative obligation, by this law of care with regard to the other, immunity implies an exemption or repeals such a condition: immune is he who is sheltered from obligations and dangers that

concern everyone else. Immune is he who breaks the circuit of social circulation placing himself outside of it.

Now the underlying thesis that I want to argue is essentially two. The first is that this immunitary <u>dispositif</u> -- this demand of exemption and protection -- which originally concerned the medical and juridical fields, progressively extends to all sectors and languages of our life, until it becomes the coagulating point, both real and symbolic, of contemporary experience. Certainly, every society until today expressed a demand for self-protection. Every collective asks a radical question about preserving life. But my impression is that only today, with the end of modernity, such a demand has become the rotating axis around which is constructed both the practices and the imaginary of an entire civilization. To get an initial sense of what I mean, it's enough to take a look at the role that immunology, which is say the science delegated to studying and strengthening immunitary systems, has taken on, not only with respect to medicine but also with regard to the social, to the juridical, to the ethical. Only consider what the auto-immunitary deficiency syndrome of AIDS meant in terms of normalization, which is say the subjectification with respect to precise norms related to individual and collective experience, which aren't only hygienic or health-related; to the barriers not only prophylactic but socio-cultural that the nightmare of the disease set up in the area of all inter-relations. If we move from the sphere of infectious diseases to that of the social, of immigration, we have still more proof: the fact that the growing flux of immigrants is seen -- in my view utterly mistaken -- as one of the major dangers for our societies shows as well from another side the centrality that the immunitary question

has taken on. Wherever new barriers and new checkpoints are set up, new lines of separation appear with respect to something threatening or at least that appears to threaten, our biological, social, and environmental identity. It is as if that fear which Elias Canetti singled out as the origin of our modernity in a perverse short-circuit between touch [tatto], contact [contatto], and contagion has grown more acute. The contact, the relation, the being in common, immediately appears as crushed by the risk of contamination.

The same thing can be said for information technologies. Here as well the most severe problem, the very nightmare of all users, is represented by so-called computer viruses, not just in our small computers, but the massive computers that regulate and control financial, political, and military relations on a global scale. For some time now all Western governments have set aside enormous funds for constructing anti-virus programs that are capable of immunizing networks from the infiltration by pathogenic agents, even with regard to possible terrorist attacks. That today as well battles over the juridical immunity of political figures is at the center of national and international controversies -- as it was for Pinochet and Milosevic, but also for many, many others -- is further proof of what I've said. What one fears, beyond the specific cases cited here, is a weakening of sovereign power of single States, a breaking of the juridical borders of national organizations in favor of some form of international justice that still remains to be built. In short, take up any perspective and what one finds taking place today, from the individual body to the social body, from the technological body to the political body, is the question of immunity, which lies at the intersection of every itinerary. What

matters is to impede, to prevent, to fight with every means available the diffusion of contagion wherever it occurs.

As I said earlier, this preoccupation with self-protection doesn't only belong to our age. The threshold of knowledge with respect to risk becomes quite different over the course of time, until it culminates precisely in our own period. This is due to a series of concurrent causes not far removed from what is called globalization, in the sense that the more humans -- but also ideas, languages, technologies -- communicate and are intertwined, the more is generated, as counter-thrust, a demand for a preventive immunization. The recent identification with local groups can be explained as a sort of immunitarian rejection of that global contamination that is globalization. The more the "self" tends to make itself "global," which is to say the harder it tries to include what is located outside itself; the more it tries to introject every form of negativity , the more negativity it reproduces. It was precisely the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, a wall both real and symbolic, that led to the construction of so many small walls, until it had transformed and perverted the very idea of community into the form of a fortress under attack. What matters most, be it on the periphery or in the center of Los Angeles, is blocking an excess of circulation and therefore of potential contamination. From this point of view the virus has become the general metaphor for all our nightmares. In reality there was a time in our societies in which fear -- at least of the biological sort -- was weakened. I am speaking of the 1950s and 1960s when the optimistic idea spread that antibiotics could rid the world of a number of millennial diseases. It seemed to remain that way until the advent of AIDS. From that moment on the psychological

dams collapsed. Symbolic and real viruses appeared again as invincible, true and proper demons capable of penetrating and pulling us down into the void of meaning. It is from that moment on that the immunitarian demand grew exponentially until it becomes our fundamental measure, the very form that we give to our lives.

2. It is precisely here, nevertheless, that my second thesis is grafted, which is the idea that immunity, which is necessary for protecting our lives, if carried past a certain threshold, winds up negating it. This in the sense that it forces it into a sort of cage or armoring in which not only our freedom is lost, but also the very meaning of our individual and collective existence, which is to say that circulation of meaning, that appearance of existence outside itself that I define with the term communitas (thereby alluding to the constitutively exposed character of existence); to the ex of existentia as Heidegger would say. Here lies the terrible contradiction on which we should focus: what saves individual and collective life is also that which impedes its development, and indeed what, beyond a certain point, winds up destroying it. We could say, by using the language of Walter Benjamin, himself dead because of the closing of a border - - that immunization at high doses is the sacrifice of the living, which is to say, every form of qualified life, to simple survival. The reduction of life to its bare biological layer, of bios to zoe. To remain as such, life is forced to give way to an outside power that penetrates it and crushes it; to incorporate that nothing that it wishes to avoid, remaining captured by its void of meaning.

On the other side, this contradiction -- this antinomical connection between protection and negation of life -- is implicit in the very same procedures of medical immunization. As we know, to vaccinate a patient against a disease, one introduces into the organism a controlled and sustainable portion of the disease. This means that in this case medicine consists of the same poison that it is must protect itself from, such that in order to keep someone alive it's necessary to give them a taste death. It is as if modern immunitary processes intensified to their maximum extent this contradiction: the cure is always given in the form of a lethal poison. If this immunological practice is related to the workings of the social body, the same antinomy is registered, the same contrafactual paradox: to raise continually the threshold of attention of society vis-a-vis a risk, which is what we have grown accustomed to for some time now -- means blocking the growth or even having run backwards towards an earlier state. It is as if, rather than adjusting the level of protection to the effective nature of the risk, what is adjusted is the perception of the risk to the growing demand for protection, which is to say risk is artificially created in order to control it, as insurance companies routinely do. All of this is part of modern experience, but my impression is that we have touched a point, a limit, from which this mechanism of reciprocal strengthening between risk and insurance, between protection and the negation of life, really risks getting out of hand. In order to see non-metaphorically what I mean, consider what happens in so-called auto-immune diseases, when the immunitarian system is so powerful that it turns against itself, against the same mechanism that should defend it, and so doing destroying it. Certainly, immunitary systems are necessary. No individual or social

body can do without them, but when they grow without limit they wind up pushing the entire organism towards an explosion or an implosion.

This is exactly the threat that took place after the tragic events of September 11, 2001 because I believe the war currently underway is doubly linked with the immunitary paradigm: that it is both the aggravated form and its moving beyond control [impazzimento]; the tragic epilogue of what we can call this "immunitarian crises," in the same sense that René Girard uses the expression of "sacrificial crises," when the logic of sacrifice sweeps past the banks that circumscribe the sacrificial victim, pushing as the result the entire society towards violence. It is then that blood spurts out everywhere and that men literally are torn to pieces. I want to say that the current conflict appears as originating in the combined pressure of two contrasting and mirror-like immunitarian obsessions, that of Islamic fundamentalism, determined to protect to the death its own presumed religious, ethnic, and cultural purity from contamination by Western secularization; and that of a West set on excluding the rest of the planet from sharing its own excessive amount of goods. When these two conflicting impulses [spinte] are brought together without any way of separating them, the entire world is shaken by a convulsion that has the characteristics of the most devastating kind of auto-immune disease: an excess of defense with respect to the elements outside the organism is directed towards the organism itself with potentially lethal effects. What exploded, along with the Twin Towers, was the double system of immunity that until then had held the world together.

Let's not lose our perspective on the fact that this tragic event took place completely within the triangle of Monotheism: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, with its real and symbolic epicenter, at Jerusalem. Everything happened there; everything was repressed [incatenato] and then unleashed [scatenato] there, within the deadly circle of monotheism (and not within Buddhism or within Hinduism). Why? I would hazard that these civilizations -- Islamic, Christian, and Jewish -- are in conflict not only because they oppose each and are different from each other, but on the contrary, inasmuch as they are too alike, too tied to each other in their constitutive categories, in their logic of the One, in their syndrome of monotheism. That in the East this takes on the figure of the one god and in the West of our one true god, money as the absolute value, doesn't detract from the fact that the logic of both is subjected to the principle of Unity; that both want to unify the world on the basis of their point of view. It is this that I would define as the metaphysical stakes of this war ahead of oil, territory, and bombs. What paradoxically is at stake is the question of truth; the battle that gives no quarter between two partial truths whose ambition is to present themselves as global truths, which is precisely that of the monotheistic model, or at a minimum that of a political monotheism that has been politicized, when the religious monotheisms contain something other than simply spiritual riches. On the one hand the unvarnished truth of Islamic fundamentalism whose truth completely coincides with itself -- a truth written in the Koran and from there primed for world conquest. On the other hand the empty truth of Western nihilism, of a secularized Christianity according to which the truth is that truth does not exist, from the moment when what matters is only the principle of

technological performance, the logic of making money, and total production. These are the two truths, the one completely full, the other completely empty; the one present to itself and the other having withdrawn into its own absence, but both absolute, exclusive and excluding, that are in conflict with one another, having the very same immunitarian obsession, so as to conquer the world [mondo globale], of the globality of a world reflected back on itself, bursting with itself until it explodes. Political monotheism -- the idea that there must correspond to one single god one single king and one single realm -- expresses the very essence of immunization in its most violent version: the closing down of borders that cannot tolerate anything outside; that exclude the very idea of an outside; that do not admit any sort of extraneousness that might threaten the logic of the One-everything.

3. Without wanting to examine the political, social, and cultural responsibility for such a state of affairs, I would like to limit myself to this undeniable fact. Entrusted to an auto-immunitary regime that is directed obsessively to identifying what is properly its own, the world, which is to say human life in its totality, doesn't have a great chance for survival. The negative protection of life, strengthened so much that it is reversed into its own opposite, will wind up destroying not only the enemy outside it but also its own body. The violence of interiorization -- the abrogation of the outside, of the negative could be reversed into an absolute exteriorization, in a complete negativity. And so, what can we do to break out of this logic of death? Where can we find, as an ontology of the actual would have it, the point at which the present can be inverted towards another

possible present? It's difficult for anyone to offer a complete response to similar

questions. What is clear is what we can no longer do. We certainly can't return to the

"Westphalian model," with states acting in concert, states which are completely

sovereign with respect to themselves and free with regard to all other states, in a model

that dominated the world for at least five hundred centuries. In the same way it isn't

possible to reconstruct an equilibrium between blocks facing off against each other as

dominated the world from the end of the Second World War to the last decade of the

last century. Yet a return to a constellation of ethnically defined sites is equally

unimaginable, sites joined together by an absolute relation between territory [terra],

blood, and language. The route to take, in my opinion, doesn't pass through the

dialectic between global and local, which seems to be contrastive but isn't -- which all

contemporary political philosophies refer to, but rather to the construction of a new

relation between singular and of the world [mondiale]. Yet this in turn can be thought

only by breaking with the monotheistic paradigm and of its constitutively

immunitarian logic. The question, which I here want to pose radically, is that of

escaping the theological-political lexicon in which despite everything, we all still find

ourselves, as is demonstrated by the monotheistic syndrome that I spoke of earlier. And

I am not speaking now of the Islamic world, but rather of the West, permeated with

political theology in its very secularization as Carl Schmitt has already explained to us.

 Of course to do so, that is to be free from the theological-political lexicon out of

which all our categories originate, beginning with that of sovereignty and running to

that of the juridical person, isn't at all easy. But really there is no other way. We can't

turn back the clock to a world that is constituted by pieces that are autonomous in themselves and potentially hostile to what is outside. That would mean standing pat with the destructive and self-destructive logic of <u>immunitas</u>, when we are instead concerned with returning to thinking the reverse of <u>immunitas</u> in the open and plural form of <u>communitas</u>. The world, which is by now irreversibly united, is not only to be thought, but 'practiced' as a unity of difference, as a system of distinctions, in which distinction and difference aren't points of resistance and residue with respect to the processes of globalization, but rather their very same form. Naturally I know well enough that transforming this philosophical formula into real practice, into political logic, and conceptual language is anything but easy. And yet we need to find the mode, the forms, the conceptual language for converting the immunitary declension that all the political fundamentalisms have adopted in a singular and plural logic in which the differences becomes precisely that which keep the world united. I believe that the West -- if we really wanted to use this category non-defensively or offensively against that which isn't it -- has in itself the strength, the resources, the cultural means to attempt such an operation of radical conversion, here adopting the word' most forceful definition. And this notwithstanding the recurring temptation to make the world homologous to only one model. From Heraclites on the notion that one could be united not by homogeneity but by difference [<u>distinzione</u>] and diversity is part of the tradition that the West produced but never carried out fully. A good part of its violent history is marked by its repression and forgetting. The tragic paradox that we are living today lies in the fact that those who have declared war on the West have reproduced and

strengthened to the point of paroxysm the very same phobic obsession, the same

conviction that community or a relation between those who differ cannot exist that isn't

that of mortal, auto-immune conflict.

In a situation such as this, in which the most destructive tendencies are reflected

and doubled in the same road to war, the only possibility is that of breaking the mirror

in which the self is reflected without seeing anything but itself; to break the spell in

other words. The great French linguist Emile Benveniste reminds us that the Latin

pronoun 'self,' as in the case as well in all its modern derived forms, carries within it an

ancient Indo-European root, from which the Latin words suus and soror and the Greek

éthos and étes are derived, meaning relation and ally. Benveniste from this infers that

that root is the origin of two distinct semantic lines: the first referring to the individual

and private self, expressed by ídios (what belongs to the same self [se stesso]) , and the

second to a larger circle in which more subjects are brought into relation, one with the

other. From here the terms hetaíros and sodalis, both expressive of a communitarian

connection -- something that is common to those that are characterized as such, as

precisely happens with the munus of the communitas. From here then we have the

complex relation between the "self" which is reflective of the "same self" [se stesso] and

the "self" which is distinct from and disconnected from the sed. This demonstrates that

at the origin of what we refer to as the "self" there is precisely a knot that cannot be

undone of unity and difference, of identity and otherness. Without privileging in any

way these etymologies, perhaps in the depths of our linguistic tradition we can find the

keys for inverting, as Foucault said, the line of the present; to free up, in the actuality of

its history, another possibility that is also present, even if it is one that has never yet

been experienced.

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