

“Let Us Connect”: On a Political Pronoun

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Abstract

Inspired by the title of Emmanuelle Pagano’s book, *Nouons-nous*, this article (already published in French as “«Nouons-nous». Autour d’un pronom politique”, *Critique*, 2017/6, n. 841-842, 469-483) interprets this formula as a call to a political reflexion on the common. The impulse force contained in this title pushes the author to review various implications of the term “nous” (we/us), where “the question is to know, to feel, how we connect, and *to what* we connect ourselves”. The aim is to understand that *nous* is not a simple “sum of subjects added together but a collective subject, amplified around a specific enunciation. *We* does not mean ‘all those who are like me,’ but rather ‘all those who can be the *I* of this *we*.”

Nouons-nous: the novelist Emmanuelle Pagano recently gave this compelling title to a recent work (2013),¹ a collection of fragments in which each chapter sets itself the task of telling the precise form of a romantic relationship.

Nouons-nous: the expression is exciting, inspiring, it has the infallible aptness of a poem. We receive the *us* as a kind of call: yes, let’s do it, let’s get together, *nouons-nous*. What we hear is that in the *us* something (but what exactly?) is being tied together [*se nouer*], must be so tied, and might then just as easily untie itself. We can guess too that thinking and feeling the *us* of love might be helpful for reflecting on what is shared; in other words, that the *us* of love could, if we listen to it, infinitize itself in politics. (We know that this very expansion of the in-love *us*, immemorial object of lyric poetry, was a favored field for Resistance poets like Aragon, Éluard

¹ The French title of Marielle Macé’s article, “‘Nouons-nous’: autour d’un pronom politique” (Macé 2017) is borrowed from this recent book, and demands some explanation. *Nouons-nous*: let us knot ourselves, tie ourselves up together, let us get together, you and I or we and you. The verb *se nouer* literally means to knot together, and is used to refer to making connections, becoming close, even to becoming inextricable, like a complex knot whose strands are neither altogether separate nor altogether one. A possible translation of the title would be “Only connect our selves.” The French sonorities of *nouer* and its many derived terms – *nouage* (knottings, connections), *dénouer* and *dénouages* (unknot or disconnect, in verb or noun form) – are very similar to those of the pronouns *nous*, the first person plural. Macé plays with these semantic and phonic parallels throughout her article – let this be noted here since in most cases they do not transfer into English (the French words will appear in square brackets to alert the reader to their presence in the original text). The translation renders *nous* variously as *we* and *us*: in French the pronoun *nous* can serve both as subject and object, whereas English uses *we* as subject pronoun and *us* as object pronoun. The substantivized uses of *we* and *us* (which will be in italics, as here, to distinguish from direct uses of the words) both stand in for *nous* [translator’s note].

and Char, just as it is today for someone like Stéphane Bouquet.) We sense that the forceful statement of *us* can quickly begin to stutter or stagnate, falling into an abuse of *us*, into the thickly knotted *us* we know today. We understand, finally, that it is the role of linguistic exploration and of literature to set the possible stages for *us*, for many *uses*, since with *us* we speak of language, pronouns, and moments of speech, and not only of community and pluralities. In other words: we understand that to think about *us*, we will need the help of writers and of all those inhabited by a concerted relationship to language (all those for whom language changes something).

I was reminded of the strength of the captivating call of Emmanuelle Pagano's title, and also of the alarm it sets off, when reading a series of recent reflections on the pronoun *we* [or *us*] by philosophers and writers: some of them take language (for our purposes, specifically the grammar of pronouns) and the ways politics experiences itself within it very seriously, often including Benveniste in their argumentation; others fail to listen attentively to language. In this way these different thinkers propose concepts, impulses and practices of the collective that vary widely.

How do we draw our circles?

In 2016, the philosopher Tristan Garcia published a voluminous essay entitled *Nous*² [*We* or *Us* – not translated]. It covers the entire adventure of modern emancipation (or rather emancipations), by which Garcia means the coming to visibility of theretofore invisible groups of people. He conceptualizes these groups as so many different instances of *we*, proliferating, contradictory (we women, we Jews, we Blacks, we the people, we the living, etc.) and likely to cross paths within each individual. Tristan Garcia also investigates the internal multiplicity that marks all individual identity, more explicitly today than in the past. He also sets off in search of the identity “constraints” that he claims we each hold within us; tries to show the fragility of each of the broad categories of belonging (species, gender, race, class, and age, all of which he treats with the same set-theoretic logic, and which he denaturalizes, perhaps unnecessarily at this point); and diagnoses a crisis of these categories which would explain why our time, which no longer believes in them, holds on to them nevertheless for a host of strategic uses. He concludes by calling for a more supple relationship to identity, one that doubles down neither on differences nor on resemblances.

The book is solidly built, overflowing with examples and historical reference points. It helps to name, along with the problem of *us* or rather of the many *uses* and their clashes, a sensitive zone in our contemporary existences: our ways of living politics, of experiencing

² For books that have not been translated into English, all translations are by Emelyn Lih. When a translation does exist, the existing English will be quoted, and citation information for both original and translation will appear in the bibliography [Translator's note].

solidarities and conflicts, and most of all our ways of *saying* politics (which is in fact saying what is lacking, what we need).

Tristan Garcia is right to ask the *us* question in the context of commitments, causes and emancipations; but his analysis runs the risk of diluting itself into a fairly conventional series of questions about belonging, which emerges from this discussion perhaps pluralized, complicated, denaturalized, but not exactly reexamined by listening to language. For *Nous* never opens the linguistic space of *we*, never steps forward on the pronominal stage. Its subject is both wider and simpler: it seems to me to be the vast question of community, or rather of multiple communities and of the participation of each one of us, today, in a plurality of identifying “circles,” loci of fidelities, characteristics and demands, in the middle of which we each must situate ourselves. Tristan Garcia’s question is thus what contemporary identity has become, an identity made of plural inclusions and multiple exclusions, that is to say of contradictory belongings. And he reduces the pronoun question to a multiplicity of *nouns*: women, homosexuals, the French, the living, etc.

The spatial imaginary guiding this entire enterprise (the description of “circles,” with a perimeter, intersections, superimposition – forming an identity not unlike a pile of stencils, each making the ensemble more opaque) has a certain originality, but it may encourage too simple a figuration of the political, which ends up being brought back to a matter of identification and belonging, a subject’s belonging to larger sets, those nouns with which he or she identifies, which exist around him or her like containers and organize themselves into a series of subsets: “To each diameter of this growing or diminishing circle corresponds a given state of us” (Garcia 2016: 9). This allows Garcia to point out the contradictory identifications often coexisting in subjects, and between which they must wend their political way: with what noun, for example, will a Black homosexual woman choose to identify herself, in the hope of more freedom? “It is entirely a question of priority among the different circles” (30). What is more, “from time to time, at certain important moments of our life, our order of *uses* suddenly changes and the very shape of *us* is transformed: we feel ourselves overwhelmed and converted, or divested of our one-time convictions. We have all had the experience of inwardly altering the priority of our belongings, and thus seeing the division [*découpage*] of everything we perceive transforming itself beneath our very eyes” (113). Garcia sets out this issue forcefully. But it cannot be said to be equivalent to the issue of *us*, nor even to that of the *common*, which require the examination not of sets or divisions [*découpages*] but of what a collective subject might be, a subject who corresponds to no single determinable person. This, in turn, requires examining the kind of connections that such a collective subject might invent, institute or compel: connections and disconnections [*nouages et dénouages*]. Hence, since the publication of *The Coming Insurrection*, The Invisible Committee has called for the constitution of *uses* who “would not define themselves – as collectives tend to do – by what’s inside and what’s outside them, but by the density of the ties at their core” (Committee 2007/2009: 102, as cited in Garcia 2016: 41).

The author of *Nous* displays so little interest in the pronoun question that statements like “We are all German Jews” or “We are Charlie” (which was in fact more often expressed as “I am Charlie” [*Je suis Charlie*]) seem to him to be running the risk of “inconsistency,” since they cannot lead to literal identifications. Such an attitude ignores what emerges onto grammatical stages like these. And for “I am Charlie” in particular, the grammatical experimentation at work was not really aimed at sending its addressees back “to a brutal request for identification, demanding that he or she reply” (Boucheron & Riboulet 2015: 86): are you in this group or aren’t you?, but at sharing grief. The idea was not to assume onto oneself an ownership but rather a wound. These are expressions of hospitality, not of identification.

Talking about us, talking about the *us* and for *us*: these activities encourage a different line of questioning, and imply concerted linguistic attention, supported by an answering degree of patience and concentration in others’ relationships to language and to its stages, patience and concentration such as can confidently be found in authors who have committed to listening to language. Martin Rueff’s formidable investigation into “pronominal transactions,” for which he recently laid the foundations (Rueff 2017), is a prime example.

Indeed, linguistics has many objections to the spatial representation of concentric or intersecting circles, and invites us to hear in *us* a host of other things: to experience, for instance, that *I* is not in *us* as an item in a set. That moreover, *us* is not an *in*. That *us* does not “cut out” a subset in the great circle of *everyone*. That it can just as well be mobilized for *me and you (all)* as for *me and them*, against all of you. That it is not the plural of *I*; and that it is not even necessarily, not always (but this we know), a plural at all.

Ustrations

Émile Benveniste (1966/1971) wrote the most astute description of the *us*: his description has the power to surprise us, to move concepts around, and to urge us to pose anew the question of politics by asking ourselves what kind of subject the collective subject is. Benveniste notes that almost no languages construct *we* by making *I* plural (as distinct from the third person plural, which simply pluralizes the singular *he* or *she*): *we* is a different word from *I*, and neither derives from it nor pluralizes it. Benveniste also makes clear that “the oneness and the subjectivity inherent in ‘I’ contradict the possibility of a pluralization” (Benveniste 1966/1971: 202). For *I*, and *we*, are aspects of language: they are not the grammatical nouns designating the individual or the group or their equivalents, they are positions of speech, and speech deals differently with the singular and the collective. This is because there is no possible pluralization of the position of the actual subject of speech: we cannot *speak together* – we can sing or speak in chorus, but not exactly speak as one.

Thus we do not construct *we* with *Is*. *We* is not the plural of *I*, it is rather, Benveniste shows, the undetermined “junction between ‘I’ and the ‘non-I’”, the result of an *I* that has opened itself

up to what it is not (the image strikes me as being deeply Baudelairean), that has *dilated* itself (Benveniste 1966/1971: 202-203).³

Jean-Christophe Bailly's beautiful text "nous' ne nous entoure pas" ["we' does not surround us" – not translated] is centered on his reading of Benveniste's propositions (Bailly 2014b). He thus turns to linguistics for support but also to poetry for assistance, since poetry is apt to lay out its own pronominal stages, to invent them, sharpen them, pry them open and attempt other phrasings. In this text, Bailly acts as both philosopher and poet to examine the highly specific configuration of meaning of the pronoun *we*, which has surprising things to say about our ties, our connections and disconnections [*nouages et dénouages*], but also about the constitution in history of our collectivities and our ways of linking ourselves to those collectivities as we experience them, whether we dote on them or flee them.

He begins with the grammar of pronouns, considering the enunciation situations of *we* and its performances, which are both very precise and very temporary: these he calls *ustrations* [*nostrations*]. He is bold enough to retrace the history of these *ustrations*, or in other words the history of the different political ages of community (tribal formations, nations aspiring to sovereignty, vast religious federations); and he insists on the possibility of departure, the temptation of leaving the *we* or multiple *wes*.

In relation to *we*, the possibility of departure (in the lineage of German romanticism that is so important to Bailly) is guaranteed in this text by "the ironic and Welteuropean irreducibility of *I* which preserves us from willfully closed identities" (Bailly 2014b: 172).⁴ One might quibble with the idea of basing the prying-open of *we* on *I* (why not, for example, on other shapes of the collective, other ways to relate to the *not-I*, in other words other connections [*nouages*]?). But Bailly has hit on what is most essential by calling for a breathing space and for addressing the current abuses of *us*. Elsewhere, in important works such as *Le Dépaysement. Voyages en France* and *France(s), territoire liquide* ["Changes of Scene: Travels in France" and "France(s), a liquid territory" – not translated],⁵ the prying-open of *we* is not predicated on *I* but on patient attention to the unruly multiplicity of ways in which we live and see this country, and which make of France something other than a unit cut out (detoured) on the surface of the globe: in Bailly's telling, France is the equivalent of a stretched-out animal skin, worn thin in some places, close to breaking point, made up of places of all kinds, lovable or less so, but all described with patience, consideration, and precision. Places that each offer up their own economies of spatiality and of practices, forgettings, withdrawals, dreams, and that each provide a way for a country to be a country, to speak, tell and believe that it is a

³ Benveniste's exact phrasing is "un 'je' dilaté au-delà de la personne stricte" (Benveniste 1966: 235). Macé quotes the verb *dilaté* or "dilated," which Meek translates as "expands." [Translator's note]

⁴ "Ce qui importe, c'est la possibilité du départ, la tentation de la sortie, l'irréductibilité ironique et welteuropéenne du *Je* qui empêche la fermeture sur l'identité." [Translator's note]

⁵ In a sense these works (Bailly 2011; Bailly 2014a) are also about *us*, and specifically the *us* of the French nation, in that they capture the *us* by the conscience of our shared perils: identity-focused or set-theoretical understandings of the collectivity.

country. The idea here is not to turn our back on the issue of identity or to abandon thinking through its categories, but to think it through in other ways, for example by contrasting the emotion of belonging with that of “provenance”: I am from here, no more no less, life for me began in this place, and then continued from there. *Le Dépaysement* [*dépaysement* can be defined as a change of place or country and the disorientation resulting from such a change] is a struggle against “rooting” [*empaysement*]. Bailly bends his ear to that “provenance”: that something that “holds together, stays together, which doesn’t necessarily square with existing limits, which is like an emission” (Bailly 2014c: 152), not a thing but a *sending* that goes on to propagate itself. His task was to free this emission within the context of the “country-shape” [*forme-pays*]: to dig into identity in order to show that it “exists only as something fabricated over the centuries, constructed precisely by its borders, by contacts, by the fact that it is crossed, crossable, visited and visitable, curious and open,” to put it back on track. A country offers itself up like a turn of phrase, “ceaselessly threatened by all that seeks to turn the mystery of identity into a system of values” (Bailly 2014c: 151). A country (this country) was not conceived as a container, an effect of a delineation of borders, but as a mobile configuration of edge effects and flight effects. And it felt good, in 2011, to be able to experience the country in this way; 2011 was two years after French historians had been “called upon, by governmental injunction, to march bravely to the border and there to consolidate ‘national identity,’ by burying along the frontier, ever deeper, those good old ‘roots,’ which (it was hoped) were Christian” (Boucheron 2010: 11). Bailly changed the terms of the question: instead of asking what France is, who is French, who exactly is within and who without, he asked what France was like, how it was, here, there, how France lives in the many loci of its territory...

In a comparable way, the pronoun approach changes everything,⁶ for it allows us (or rather obliges us, in the best way) not to ask *us* the question *who* (who is one of *us*, who is not, in how many *uses* are we?) but rather to ask what kind of shape it is, how it is made and unmade, how we lean against it, how we escape it. For if *we* operates a “junction between I and the ‘non-I,’” *us* evades the determination of that *not-I*. Something in *us* must, in a sense, unlimit itself. So that “even if as a general rule the *us*, as it functions in everyday usage, is in the end fairly transparent, the fact remains that its indefinite status accompanies *us* like a shadow, assigning no defined community which would remain stable when it calls.” And so that instead of “considering this indefinite status as a lack or absence, perhaps we should try approaching it as a positive trait”; that is to say, decide to use it as a starting point, and from there, “imagine this uncertainty or hesitation ... as an operating condition of *us*, as what allows *us* not to close in upon itself and what allows the community it designates to think of itself not as a circle with watertight borders but as a moment in a never-finished process of self-formation.” Bailly expresses this as a wish, for “today the *us* does not present itself to anyone in the same way as

⁶ The journal *Klésis*, connected to the analytical tradition in philosophy, titled a recent issue “Dire nous” [Saying we], and also anchors its argumentation in a definition of grammatical person inherited from Benveniste’s work on language, initially in any case (Marrou 2016).

to anyone else” (Bailly 2014b: 176-178) and for this reason we must meticulously undertake the examination of connections and disconnections [*nouages et dénouages*], not the question “who is us?” but the analysis of multiple *ustrations*.

The text of “ ‘nous’ ne nous entoure pas” also appears in in Jean-Christophe Bailly’s latest volume, *L’Élargissement du poème* [“The Broadening of the Poem” – not translated]: his title speaks to the ways in which poetry can be an arena where language situations opened up by the pronoun *us* can work together, sharpen each other and display their vulnerabilities (Bailly 2015). Such situations remain open and are ready to open anew each time the political speaks or tries to speak for itself.

The abuse of *us*

Bruno Karsenti too pays heed to the particular characteristic of the pronoun *us*, that it is not the plural of *I* and that there is not truly speaking any first person plural. In *La Question juive des modernes* [“The Jewish Question of the Moderns” – not translated], this conundrum founds a “philosophy of emancipation” [the book’s subtitle]. Karsenti (2017) offers a remarkable analysis,⁷ both very open and very controlled: he is in dialogue with Benveniste but also with Jean-Claude Milner’s rereading (2002) of Benveniste in *Le Périphe structural* [“The Structural Journey” – not translated], and with the historical effects of the forceful use of the “Jewish name” and its adoption as an *us* that often arrives from without, acting as a coercive demand for identification.

Karsenti examines an open letter from 1942 penned by Marc Bloch and Georges Friedmann in answer to the call entitled “Nous, Israélites de France...” [We, Israelites of France...] sent out by the Union générale des Israélites de France [General Association of the Israelites of France] that Vichy had formed in 1941, requiring all Jews to register and to contribute. The idea was that they voluntarily “declare themselves,” which meant exposing themselves and paying up. Jews “of France,” then, not “French Jews,” were called upon to form a group. Marc Bloch’s letter, signed by many intellectuals including Benveniste, begins as follows: “Dear Sir, We, French Israelites, speak to you...” Bloch’s modification of the expression “Israelites of France” shows that he imagined no other future than a *French* one, incarnated in a true national society, the very one that Vichy had destroyed.

The strength of Bruno Karsenti’s argumentation, which closely follows that of Jean-Claude Milner, consists in imagining Benveniste’s dismay, as scholar of language and of subjectivity in language, upon feeling obligated to sign this letter in protest even as he was indignant at the obligation felt by all co-signers to say *we*. The letter is abusive in that no grammatical subjec-

⁷ Excerpts of the book initially appeared in the journal *Po&sie* with the title “Ni évaporés, ni gelés: L’émancipation et son reste” (Karsenti 2008).

tivity comes into being in its enunciation, since any such subjectivity is banished to begin with by an imposed collectivity.

“Your injustice and our anger” rings out in every instance of *we*, an equation set off by the obligation to say *us*; that is, no longer to speak as a subject, no longer to achieve subjecthood in language. This is the crime of which a certain *we* is guilty: of distorting the very language that is the sole location of the subject’s existence. (Karsenti 2017: 339-340)

This is the linguistic problem with the call “We, Israelites of France...”, and the linguist’s indignation is “of having been convoked in language, at the cost of distorting language itself” (Karsenti 2017: 352). Here, the collectivity should not have had to state itself, to announce itself, to take this particular form within the larger collectivity of the nation. This *we* was “ill-formed” (Karsenti 2017: 354) and is precisely what a true Republican politics ought to have prevented, a politics for whom saying *we* should enact a liberation.

“In politics,” Karsenti concludes, “there is an inherent risk of shifts in meaning, of an insinuating fallacy: the one that calls *we* a true plural, and thus breaks its invention in speech.” Here, the “Jewish question” gets to the heart of the modern project of an emancipation whose history has made its incompleteness prominent and subsequently dressed up as a “problem to solve” (Karsenti 2017: 22).

This example serves as a warning against the abuse of *us*. And a warning expressed not in the name of *I*, as if it were *I*’s job to make *us* vacillate, but an invitation to nuance the kind of connection [*nouage*] we must be capable of to be confidently socialized in the modern world, that is to say to be capable of belonging even as we are the subjects of an unfinished emancipation. “The challenge is not to be truly oneself, which results in one never being completely oneself,” the challenge is to understand “the relationships—linguistic and social—which underpin the possibility of saying *I* just as much as they do the possibility of saying *we*” (Karsenti 2017: 358-359). In the end, what we want to know is what the *we* ties or connects (and thus what it can untie or disconnect), not what ties can be made with nouns or numbers, with those whom it is supposed can be counted within the *we*. Karsenti expresses this by turning to Durkheim: the progressive emancipation of the individual does not require that he or she tear himself away from society, but that he or she “connect to society in a different way than hitherto.” (Durkheim 1906: 106, as cited in Karsenti 2017:19). Let us not then ask how to abstain from saying *we*, but rather this: how and when shall we truly come together, and say it?

The plural of what?

Opening up the stage of linguistics, opening in parallel the arena of poetry: these gestures transform the very order of the questions we ask *we*. They allow, and even require, as is now

clear, not to ask ourselves at once who *we* is, nor who exactly makes up this or that *we*—what its extension is, how it intersects with other *wes*—but rather *what we* is, what brings the saying of *we* into being, what kind of connections and experience a given *we* promotes, forbids or makes difficult. We must ask what a particular linguistic configuration truly changes for *us*.

As an example: even the idea calmly put forth in the opening of Tristan Garcia's *Nous*, which reads as a reasonable and even inspiring hypothesis – “Let's agree that the subject of politics is *we*” (Garcia 2016: 7) – even this idea is endangered when we listen to language, which asks us to be patient regardless of whether the idea itself matters to us, thrills us, and (rightfully) attracts us.

Martin Rueff's work on pronouns in general leads us to several important questions to counter Garcia's idea. For example, let us ask ourselves, without deciding too quickly, what the pronoun of the political is; for nothing assures us that *we* is the only one or the right one. Jean-Claude Milner, expounding his conviction that politics is the affair of speaking beings, organizing the opportunity to speak and the removal of that opportunity among a multiplicity of subjects, has also asked if “political pronouns” exist (Milner 2007). For Rousseau, for instance, whom Martin Rueff chooses as a guide in his investigation into the grammar of pronouns, *we* is the arena of the love relationship in which two *Is* passionately abandon themselves: politics, on the other hand, emerges from the accurate harmonizing between *everyone* and *each one*: not a bunch of *eachs* (which would be the basis for liberalism, a politics that *connects* nothing) but a certain connection [*nouage*] between *each* and *every*, a different relationship between *I* and the non-*I*, imposing the conviction of equality, and thinking in terms of undetermined grammatical status rather than in terms of counting or listing. (Indefinite pronouns, here, resonate with the *indeterminacy* Claude Lefort situated at the heart of democratic social forms.)

Speaking for myself, I am mindful of the current insistence of the left, of Chantal Mouffe, for example (Mouffe 2016), on a political life that rests on the dual construction, acknowledged and combative, of a *we and they*, an *us and them*. Here *we* is indeed the pronoun of the political, but not as the outline of a circle defined by identity but as the necessary corollary to a politically constructed *them*, in that it declares and pursues an initial potential for conflict which presents questions not of belonging but of struggle. The *we and they* imposed by our will to base political action on the manifest fact of dissensus: this *we and they* has indeed nothing to do with identification, but with determining a cause, a great cause, one which is worth risking something for and which would express what matters to us – since what matters is not the same for everyone. To me, a call like this would increase its potential for accuracy by remaining attentive to *we* and *us* in all the semantic singularity we have been exploring, in a schema where *nous* is not taken for granted, and is born of struggle. The question is to know, to feel, how we connect, and *to what* we connect ourselves (and against what, and how “against” – not necessarily by answering violence with violence, for instance: “You will not have our hate,” as was written here and there after the Bataclan attacks.)

For what does it mean to really understand that *we* is not the plural of *I*, that it is not the aggregation of many *Is*? What does it mean to listen to that aspect of language, which is the dwelling place of politics and its dynamics of the right to speech or the removal of that right? It means understanding that *nous* is not a sum of subjects added together but a collective subject, amplified around a specific enunciation. *We* does not mean “all those who are like me,” but rather “all those who can be the *I* of this *we*, take that *I* upon themselves, for themselves, all those who can speak in the name of *we*: all those connected by a cause. The *we* of language is the subject defined by a struggle and by the actions engaged in that struggle. *We* effects a junction between *I* and some non-*I*, between my own affairs and a greater cause. In this way *we* is always ahead of itself, as it were: we must not conflate it with a logic of identification or belonging. With *we* the goal is not to say who I am, to announce myself (dramatist Valère Novarina has one of his characters say “Decline yourself, boy!”), not even to say “like whom” I am, but to say what we will be able to accomplish if we connect our selves.

We can now with even greater conviction agree that *we* does not surround us: *I* is not in *we*, *we* is not an *in*, a container into which one might pour oneself, a “circle” drawn within a multitude. Politics do not manifest themselves in *we* as a cartography of sets labeled by identity and their various intersections, even if such intersections are recognized as numerous, lively and subject to exponential growth. *We*, when patiently listened to, opens not onto the question of identity, but onto the infinite task of making and unmaking collectivities (yes, unmaking as well: see the wall on which is written “Foreigners, don’t leave us alone with the French!”). Let us connect and disconnect, with everything that that implies about the space allotted to emotions and affections. What becomes manifest as a result in communal life, in life lived *as us* as it were, is both the impossibility and the need for a shared life: both the recognition and the negation of our impossibility to connect our selves to others “in a way that is simultaneously coherent, stable and just” (Boltanski 2009/2011: 160).⁸ We must make collectivities not in spite of what separates us, but *with* that potential for conflict impossible to circumvent which is both the burden and the possibility of the political. Here again language has a lesson to teach us, opening a breach that one may hear as a loneliness, something beyond which but also in communication with which the subject, the one who says *I*, must compromise to make *we*: “*I* also expresses that all subjects are distinct and that this inherent separation [...] opens the necessarily disseminated or disseminating space of speech” (Bailly 2014b: 173).

Perhaps *we* can be called the plural of *alone*: the plural of *alone*, *other*, *separated*. *We* is not made from all our *Is* together, whether they are solid or full of holes, but from our solitudes together: *we* pools our solitudes. In other words, *we* brings our solitudes together, overcomes them by this togetherness, and yet maintains them intact. We make and unmake collectivities with the help of such solitudes, not despite them. We connect nothing (a nothing of great

⁸ Work like that of the sociologist and poet Luc Boltanski is particularly effective at bringing about these forms of listening to *we*. Boltanski is always attentive to initial dissensus; he analyzes the way people make and unmake collectivities in a space marked by a multitude of disagreements.

significance) but our equal uncertainties, our equal solitudes, and thus also our equal potential.

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We is decidedly not the last word: it is the starting point for a necessary investigation intimately connected to our present but which must be led with patience, freedom and care, never ceasing to listen to language. *We* has many meanings: sometimes *we* is abused, sometimes the use of *we* is itself an abuse. A well-understood *we*, language suggests, is always ahead of itself, it is the name of a cause, a struggle, a task, rather than that of a belonging or an identity (which are more readily expressed using the third person, by cutting out little islands of *hes* and *shes* in the great set of *all*). *We* exists only already pried open; thus “we of French stock” [“nous Français de souche”] has no meaning (no meaning for a *we*, no honor); “we the French” has a meaning if nationality is something that is acquired and given. It has a meaning in the historiographical enterprise to write the “global history of France” led by Patrick Boucheron (2017). It has a meaning in the vigilant attention paid to country and countryside by Jean-Christophe Bailly reflecting on the notion of “provenance,” which is the point of departure of a limitless line into time (as opposed to reflecting on origins, which are a return toward a single point). But “we the French” loses all meaning in the mouth of any Le Pen just as it lost meaning under Vichy, by becoming a countable plural, isolating a set closed like an enclosure, incapable of infinitizing itself – as if *nous Français* [we the French] contained a plural unified enough to create a subject capable of producing speech about itself. I say these things not to show my ideological sympathies but to urge that we listen to language and to historicity in language. *We* is unlimiting by definition: not undetermined (on the contrary, it is determined: by a struggle, ideas, connections, future plans, everything that does precisely solidify it into a collective subject, a subject capable of intervening by speech), but unlimiting: firmly of a mind never to count its members. There is no mechanical virtue in *we*; *we* is only as good as the cause that *we* puts ahead of itself, the idea toward which it tends and for which it struggles. Perhaps it is only worthwhile when proffered with fervor (with anger and joy) in true adventures of emancipation. Saying *we* I am saying what is most important to me, what I am ready to fight for: saying what I must defend or accuse to preserve my love of life.

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