

Politics of Dis-Enclosure

Religion — Community — Violence

International Seminar with Achille Mbembe and other leading scholars,
inspired by Jean-Luc Nancy's work

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Research Centre for Religion & Transformation in Contemporary Society

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Questioning globalization

In view of an ever-increasing globalization process in which people relate to an ever-increasing plurality of “others”, understanding what being in the world means seems to be one of the most ardent questions that contemporary thought has to deal with. This is all the more true if one takes into account the absence of stable foundations as well as future points of reference for the world. When being confronted with an irrevocable loss of grounds and by the now all too palpable "end of progress", how can humans' life-worlds avoid being turned into a mere "wasteland of sense", as the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy asks in his *Dis-Enclosure* (p. 4)? Given that narratives about the "death of God" today tend to merge with notorious predilections about the "eclipse of truth" and the "end of man," this question needs to be moved to the forefront of contemporary philosophical reflection.

Questioning the secular-religious divide

Viewed in light of recent deconstructions of the secular-religious divide, one might assume that this challenge has already been taken up as a major task in current thought. For in these deconstructions, the usual tendency of secularism to advocate universal truth as against the contingency and locality of religious belief and hence to embrace globalization is questioned. However, confronted with the still immature ideas – in current scholarship – of the "post-secular" as well as the "post-colonial," philosophy *across the globe* is in fact called upon to recognize that humanity is not yet past the last "post"– and perhaps will never be. In this situation, philosophy has to take up the challenge of an explicit response to the disconcerting fact that it has not yet faced the truth about these unmediated figures often relegated to a past many deem to have overcome. The fact that both the "return of religion" as well as new racist fault lines of exclusion have cast a shadow on modern ideals of discursive reason, deliberative justice or reciprocal recognition, urges to rethink the secular-religious divide. For if all conceptions of communal being dangerously oscillate between the Scylla of some purely procedural integration and the Charybdis of a relapse into an integrist "body politic", if in other words these conceptions are incapable of avowing the violence that figures the "bonds of separation" (Heraclitus) – then does not that attest to the bankruptcy of social and political philosophy as such? The lack of reference (of truth and ground) that is often nominated as a major reason for such incapacity underlies a concrete, lived experience. This experience haunts contemporary thought, because it concerns the unavailability of a radically open, "superdiverse" (Vertovec) and inherently plural world that has to invent itself time and again in order to avoid a violent closure.

Dis-enclosure

This seminar is not intended as a memorial for Jean-Luc Nancy. It will be a thematic exchange of thoughts between several scholars to be invited, using Nancy's notion of *dis-enclosure*, denoting an opening up of the world, as an inspiration to think through and evoke this experience and its implications in a variety of contexts. The notion thus invites us to think about the thematic of the opening up of the world in new ways, also beyond the limits of Nancy's application thereof. For instance, the same notion is at work in the oeuvre of the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe. His writings on Franz Fanon and the event of decolonization explore, in a structurally similar fashion, humans' capacities to imagine the

opening of a world that extends beyond the closure of racist violence and the "infernal machine" (Sartre) of colonial heritages. Nancy calls for the deconstruction and *dis-enclosure* of Christianity not only in its onto-theological figuration but in its political-theological implications as well. Albeit not explicitly unfolded, this very gesture calls at the same time for the *dis-enclosure* of the ethnocentrism of the West. Mbembe, who in turn takes up this problematic and appropriates the notion of *dis-enclosure* as decolonization, brings it to bear most explicitly on the question of the political: How may one open up a struggle for a world where one can be a human amongst other humans, without one's *dissent* being transformed into a means for exclusion from the discursive bonds of humanity?

Dis-enclosure and entangled humanism

Central to the thinking of dis-enclosure is a reconsideration of what human being-in-common may mean if every *shared* community is always also a *partitioned* community (*geteilte Gemeinschaft – communauté partagée*). Whereas it is of paramount importance to theoretically oppose the idea of a merely procedurally unified society that justifies various forms of violence to instrumentally secure some endangered form of belonging, social body, or unscathed identity, such critical work, however, requires concrete application and testing. This idea of reconsidering our shared ontological constitution also extends beyond the question of community to the planetary as such, where the sharing of the world concerns taking responsibility for what the American political theorist William Connolly calls "entangled humanism" in the face of the deepening social and ecological crises.

Dis-enclosing Western sovereignty

The seminar "Politics of Dis-enclosure" proposes to contribute exactly to this task by way of applying the motif of *dis-enclosure* to deconstruct the disconcerting race-religion-complex that takes shape in the maelstrom of globalization. As a matter of fact, the ways in which racialized and religious "others" are classified and dominated in similar ways today attest to the necessity to rethink political systems with regard to the logic of exclusion that they disavowedly entertain. In this regard, the overall challenge of critical thought once again consists in not falling prey to the same logic one seeks to overcome, wherein the dominated becomes the dominator. This tendency is prevalent in various figurations in post-colonial countries and in the Middle East. In the last few decades, it has also become very visible in the self-perpetuating logic of Western sovereignty which is running havoc on a global scale. In its paranoid quest to secure global domination, the Western ideal of sovereignty has turned parasitic upon the presumed irrationality and violence of its relevant others: religious, radicalized, racial, etc.– others who are misperceived as forces endangering the pacifying order of the liberal imaginary and its neoliberal catechism.

The religious other, not dissimilar to the racial other, thus becomes locked up in a "double anxiety" (Appadurai): it entails the fear of inclusion in alienating terms, and the fear of exclusion, which means the exclusion from history itself. This seems to leave nothing but violence as a means of self-expression and thus makes the image of the inferior other petrifying. In seeking to disentangle the resurgent race-religion constellation that thrives on this globalized double-bind, we propose to profit from an affinity displayed in the works of Mbembe and other scholars to be invited..

This international seminar was initially envisioned to take its impetus from an inspiring and innovative engagement with Nancy and Mbembe. Sadly, Nancy passed away in 2021. Nevertheless, the aspiration is to continue exploring the ideas and themes evoked from the initial impetus of the seminar in conversation with Mbembe, and other leading scholars. The aim of the seminar is to assess the critical value and productive meaning of the motif of *dis-enclosure* to foster new contributions to world theory, contributions that take most seriously the often disavowed interplay of community, violence, and liberation in various contexts.

Provisional program of the seminar

We have engaged *six keynote speakers* (see below). They will offer lectures followed by a plenary discussion, in six half day sessions on April 25, 26 and 27. In total we aim to invite around thirty scholars to participate. If you want to register, please send an email to Kurt Appel: kurt.appel@univie.ac.at or to Laurens ten Kate: ltk@uvh.nl

Keynote speakers invited:

Petra Carlsson (Stockholm School of Theology; agreed)

Nabil Echchaibi (University of Colorado at Boulder; agreed)

Anke Graness (University of Hildesheim; agreed)

Achille Mbembe (University of the Witwatersrand; Duke University; agreed)

Hans Schelkshorn (University of Vienna; agreed)

Louise du Toit (Stellenbosch University; agreed)