

Politics and Political Action: For a Philosophical Reversal and Displacement

Pauline Vermeren

Translated from the French by James David Donahue

ABSTRACT: At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is evident that so-called Western philosophy is undergoing a shift in both its objects of thought and its epistemological role. This shift is visible from within the discipline itself, through what it does or does not legitimize as a philosophical concept, and it reveals the power dynamics embedded in some of these supposedly universal concepts. In this way, debates on race, gender, migration, and environmental justice are unfolding within a broader inquiry into the meaning of philosophy and what it is to practice it in France. Today, one of the blind spots of the philosophical tradition is a knot reflected in the political history of race—that is to say, in the very conditions that shape how we in France think about political issues tied to slavery, colonization, migration, discrimination, and racism, and which postcolonial and anti-colonial studies now call upon us to examine. Through a reading of Étienne Tassin's latest works, this essay proposes to discuss two issues. The first concerns the role of political action in considering the effectiveness of a truly common world, still embedded in this history. The second is on a decolonization of philosophy, that is, of a politics of philosophy proposing to reclaim every concept that has become abstract, disembodied, and detached from any historical or political grounding.

KEYWORDS: cosmopolitics, decolonization of philosophy, race, common world, political action

Introduction

At the first quarter of the twenty-first century, it is evident that so-called Western philosophy is undergoing a shift in both its objects of thought and its epis-

Correspondence: vermeren.pauline@gmail.com and james.donahue@uconn.edu

© Philosophy and Global Affairs, Pauline Vermeren and James David Donahue.



This open access article is published with a Creative Commons by-nc-nd license.
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

temological role. This assessment of philosophy can be seen from within the discipline itself, through what it does or does not legitimize as a philosophical concept and reveals the power dynamics embedded in some of these supposedly universal concepts. The narrative of Europe's origins clearly establishes a territorialization of philosophy (cf. Kisukidi 2019, 103–126), determining what is or is not recognized as a philosophical concept within the framework of a Western history of reason. As a result, debates on race, gender, migration, and environmental justice are unfolding within a broader inquiry into the meaning of philosophy, into a *doing-philosophy* in France, or, at the very least, a mode of thought grounded in the work of philosophers.

This reflection makes visible both the emergence of philosophical territories—as areas of thought open to reexamination—and a philosophical practice still undergoing exploration. Today, one of the blind spots of the philosophical tradition is located in a knot reflected by the political history of race, that is to say, in the very conditions that shape how we think about political issues tied to slavery, colonization, migration, discrimination, and racism, and which postcolonial and anti-colonial studies now call upon us to examine. Two questions emerge from this: the first is on the role of political action in considering the efficacy of a truly common world still embedded in this history—it is the *common* of this world which would need to be defined. The second is on a *de-colonization of philosophy*, that is, of a politics of philosophy proposing to reclaim every concept that has become abstract, disembodied, and detached from any historical or political grounding. Indeed, the concept exists “as an element of systems of thought always incorporating the social, historical, and political issues in which it is developed.”¹

This essay thus proposes to start from the reflections of Étienne Tassin on the meaning of political action within the framework of a *cosmo-politics*, followed by those of contemporary philosophers—some of whom identify as post-colonial and/or anti-colonial²—and to demonstrate how politics is central to the concept of the common. *Cosmo-politics* revisits the Enlightenment-era notion of the cosmopolitan, a citizen of the world whose global citizenship is a source of rights. Today, however, the meaning of cosmopolitanism has been inverted, with the term now referring primarily to those who are uprooted or even legally stateless. These approaches contribute to a resistance to the philosophical canon and display the hope of a philosophical vitality in the making. If the approach of contemporary theories of a critical philosophy of migration, racism, and race in France is to be fruitful for renewing philosophy, we must account for a system of thought that enables reflection on how the political question, through its social effects, shapes philosophy.

Political Action and the Reversal of the Political Question

Étienne Tassin's recent work on the migrant condition underscores the urgent need to rethink political action and the foundations of citizenship in the face of the violent nationalist and identity-based divisions produced by the nation-state. In light of this, the philosopher expresses a concern with political action, questioning both what it means to act collectively and how engagement through action affects both the individual and the community. In his final work, published posthumously, *Pour quoi agissons-nous? Questionner la politique en compagnie d'Hannah Arendt* ("Why Do We act?: Questioning Politics in the Company of Hannah Arendt," 2018), and indeed as early as *Le trésor perdu. Hannah Arendt: l'intelligence de l'action politique* ("The Lost Treasure: Hannah Arendt and the Intelligence of Political Action," 1999), *Un monde commun. Pour une cosmo-politique des conflits* ("A Common World: For a Cosmo-politics of Conflict," 2003), and *Le maléfice de la vie à plusieurs* ("The Curse of Life with Others," 2012), Étienne Tassin focused on political action by interrogating the human condition, which he saw as essential to the emergence of a common world. His final book goes against the current of conventional thought on politics by asking *what is the political*, drawing on the title phrase from Hannah Arendt, "*Qu'est-ce que la politique?*" Étienne Tassin encourages a shift in perspective, grounding politics in the meaning of political action, and viewing it as the other side of reason. More precisely, he calls for a reversal of the common understanding of politics and explores how Arendt's legacy might still serve as a guide today. If Arendt enables us to take hold of political thought "by the right end" and to "reason correctly about situations related to politics that we ordinarily encounter but that we must reflect upon in an extraordinary way,"³ what interests us here is to ask ourselves how she can allow us to think the imprint of relations of domination in the very idea of politics.

To begin with, Tassin identifies a fundamental distinction—which he emphasizes typographically—regarding the meaning of political life: between *why do we act?* that is, what causes us to act, pointing to necessity and causality; and *for what do we act?* which is to say, toward what ends do we act, in relation to freedom (Tassin 2018, 10–11). "What does it mean to act politically?"⁴ he asks. To raise this question is to interrogate the specificity of action, what makes an action political. The term "political" is not merely an adjective qualifying action; rather, action is inherently political. There is no action that is not political action: in the sense that politics belongs necessarily to the order of action (*Ibid*, 26). Tassin grounds this view in the idea that thinking political action entails a *philosophy of political experience*, that is, an effort to "grasp, within actions them-

selves, the reasons why they confer meaning upon our lives" (*Ibid*).⁵ Politics, through action, gives meaning to our lives.

Like Arendt, who gives a critique of political philosophy as the domain of philosophers who treat politics as something to be organized, controlled, and mastered, Tassin challenges the conventional view of foreigner politics, more accurately described as the policing of foreigners. He argues that we must begin with politics itself, rooted in concrete and empirical situations, rather than with abstract political philosophy,⁶ just as we must begin with the figure of the foreigner to understand politics. Building on this view, Tassin proposes to make the figures of the migrant and exile paradigmatic of the human condition: the migrant condition, as a cosmopolitical dimension, is the human condition. Foreignness, understood as the condition of being foreign, qualifies the very paradigm of the citizen, and *xenopolitics* is understood as *cosmopolitics*. The foreigner is at the heart of this *cosmopolitics*, which functions as a *xenopolitics*, allowing us to name the specific relationship between politics and the foreigner. We must consider a politics to which the figure of the foreigner is the paradigm; that is to say, before subjecting the foreigner to politics, we must first subject politics to the test of the foreigner. *Xenopolitics* operates as a reversal of the politics of the foreigner as it exists today: it is a politics with exiles, grounded in co-action and co-citizenship and understood as the very *raison d'être* of politics.

In a critique of the vocabulary of hospitality, Magali Bessone (2015b) evokes this distinction drawn between citizens and foreigners. This distinction implies that citizens are, in fact, reduced to a political question and governed in the name of a political exigency of justice, whereas foreigners are subject only to ethical obligations of hospitality; they are thus excluded from the legitimate sphere of the political and an equality of conditions. The foreigner lies at the heart of citizenship and thus at the heart of politics itself.

This is why the question of political action rests on a critique of the state and a rethinking of citizenship, which must be understood as "a life devoted to itself," a life of "plural actions," of "combat solidarities," or "shared struggles."⁷ To consider the lived experience of migration borders as a space of sharing, encounter, and confrontation is part of a process of subjectivation that enables escape from the "identity trap."⁸ Through the Arendtian conception of politics, Tassin offers a different notion of citizenship, one that cannot be a predefined characteristic derived from mere affiliation with a nation-state. The political invention of "subjects" emerges as a mode of acting through *inchoative* manifestations, that is, from the *beginnings* constituted by the acts in which each person commits themselves.⁹ The world can only be common through the exercise of

each person's action, enabled by the inherent diversities it contains (cf. Bisiaux 2016). The common world is possible only because it is divided—what Tassin, drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, calls “the evil of collective life,”¹⁰ the effect of inevitable division. Tassin approaches the vitality of contemporary democracy through dissensus, not as a war to annihilate the other, but as an agonistic contestation, *beyond success or failure* (Tassin 2012, 23).

In this profoundly human account of the meaning of politics, Tassin argues that “the actor is born from their actions, rather than preexisting them,” and that “action gives rise to a community of actors”¹¹ that continually reinvents the democratic space. The key question is not only what action produces, but also—and more importantly—what it does to the actor: “*Whom* does action produce?” The actor exists only through their actions, for “we only act by being acted upon.”¹² “Each time actors act, they create a stage, giving birth to themselves in the process” (Ibid.).¹³ Tassin examines the case of the Calais Jungle through what he calls the process of *singularization*—what Arendt calls distinction—which concerns the production of disidentification, which is to say, the emergence or revelation of *who* the actor is within political action. This is no longer a matter of what someone is by virtue of the affiliations of their first, so-called identity-based birth (their origin), but rather of a second birth, manifested through their political engagement. *What* one is by birth or socio-historical origin doesn't predetermine *who* one discovers oneself to be through the process of political subjectivation.¹⁴ This process consists in a displacement of being into the subject and produces “*an identical*, unassignable beings without allegiance or belonging” (2014, 157–173, 161).¹⁵

How does this political action take shape that gives rise to a different conception of citizenship? How can we not think today of the denied lives of migrants stranded on boats, unable to land, and condemned to die at sea in the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, or the Rio Grande; of lives exploited by the capitalist predation of neoliberal systems; of those who resist the social order and its privileged representatives; of lives extinguished by sexual and racial violence? These examples crystallize the struggle for broader social justice in favor of the many. Within this *distribution of the sensible*, can political action nonetheless serve to manifest a certain form of equality and to render visible and acknowledged all these lives as fully participating agents in the democratic process? Those who engage in struggle *begin* this transformation of the political sphere ultimately so that the interests of some no longer dictate the lives of others. For Tassin, “freedom of action and speech can unfold in the public eye, a space of appearance where each person may reveal themselves to themselves and to others . . . through concerted action” (Tassin (2018, 264)).¹⁶ The

emergence of individuals rendered invisible demands a reconfiguration of the democratic paradigm and reveals the meaning of the political.

The Meaning of a Common World

However, two remarks must be considered. The first concerns the divided nature of the community, a necessary condition for a shared world which cannot emerge through consensus, as demonstrated by Chantal Mouffe (2013) and by Sophie-Anne Bisiaux (2016), both of whom affirm the necessity of division in creating the common. If we shift Étienne Tassin's focus from French struggles to armed conflicts in Africa, South America, and Central America, can we reasonably conceive of such divisions as fruitful? The agonistic perspective appears as a central category of democracy: it is that of the "adversary," which is to say, the opponent who shares a common allegiance to the democratic axioms of liberty and equality, while preserving the dialectic between political positions. Agonistics requires dissensus, not armed conflict; an exchange of argued positions, not the lethal violence of weapons. Despite this distinction, the idea of a shared world becomes more difficult to transpose into a context of war, where life and death are daily urgencies. In this sense, to what extent can division enable the creation of the common? The second remark returns to a point that might be taken up in readings of Tassin's later work. The notion of the migrant condition as the human condition is a potent one. But does it also impose a limitation that prevents us from considering other perspectives, beyond the self-evidence of the migrant as a figure of universality embodying all forms of political subjectivation? If Tassin theorizes the current migratory situation, does he account for systems of domination—particularly those of gender and race—which are deeply entangled with the question of migration and cannot escape a historico-political reading marked by colonial and postcolonial domination and shaped by economic power?

The second remark concerns the fact that Tassin also leaves unresolved the practical implementation of this collective engagement, despite his on-the-ground experience in the Calais Jungle and his written appeal addressed to the President of the Republic, the Minister of the Interior, the prefects of the Hauts-de-France region, and the mayor of Calais.¹⁷ This is precisely what Edelyn Dorismond seeks to interrogate in the Haitian context: "What common movement can be undertaken with agents who have exploited the trust of citizens to defend the interests of the 'bourgeois,' with businessmen concerned only with accounting calculations of profit to the detriment of the majority, now sunk in shameful misery, in indifference and contempt?" (Dorismond 2019).¹⁸ From the theoretical standpoint of political action, how has this un-

derstanding of a world as necessarily shared yet fractured by the totalizing violence of the current migratory situation, particularly from the Global South to the North, found expression in practice?

The fruitfulness of putting a theoretical inquiry into practice—or the necessity of a practical pursuit aimed at conceptual restitution—leads us to question the meaning of a “philosophy of the field” (Vollaire 2017).¹⁹ Such a philosophy would involve an inquiry rooted in fieldwork, interviews, and observations. Through a methodological shift and a renewed dialogue between philosophy and the human and social sciences, the field offers a decentering of academic philosophy toward spaces of resistance and the construction of counter-powers. In the *Manifeste pour une philosophie sociale* (2009, “Manifesto for a Social Philosophy”), Franck Fischbach articulates the idea that the dominant philosophy in France at the end of the nineteenth century, during the period in which sociology emerged, was a reflexive philosophy. That is, a philosophy of consciousness oriented toward interiority and individual awareness, without direct engagement with the external world of historical and social reality. This helps explain why, in France, the questioning of social reality could only occur on the margins of philosophy, if not entirely outside it, and often in rupture with or even opposition to it. There is therefore a kind of philosophical suspicion toward the social understood as bearing political stakes and tied to social problems, which are grouped under the heading of “the social question,” meaning merely administrative concerns. And yet, social philosophy cannot be reduced to that, to mere matters of management or the accounting of reality; just as political philosophy, in Arendt’s sense, separates itself from the treatment of politics as an object to be organized, controlled, mastered, or directed. This stance, she argues, constitutes an obstacle to understanding what is truly at stake in political life. She calls instead for an engagement from within politics itself, rather than beginning from philosophy and from the claim that politics should not be subjected to the demands of philosophical thought. What is required instead is an effort to subject philosophy to the contingency that is politics, and thus its plurality of stakes. Philosophy is deeply marked by political activity, whatever form it takes, and thus implies the need to reinterrogate the historico-political stakes that have shaped philosophical thought. In this sense, the very notion of disidentification as a form of political action underscores a threshold in the real.

Surpassing Arendt

Tassin suggested that Arendt could “serve as a guide for us today” (Tassin 2018, 14).²⁰ But even if Arendt enabled us to grasp political thought “from the right

end”²¹ and to “reason correctly on those situations related to politics that we ordinarily encounter but must reflect on in an unordinary way” (*Ibid.*, 15)²² did she, however, allow us to think the imprint of colonial and racial domination in the post-independence expression of politics?

Did Arendt, in fact, underestimate the role and effects of race in modern history? For her, “Race-thinking was a source of convenient arguments for varying political conflicts, but it never possessed any kind of monopoly over the political life of the respective nations; it sharpened and exploited existing conflicting interests or existing political problems, but it never created new conflicts or produced new categories of political thinking.”²³ Yet the idea that racialized people cannot constitute a “political body” is precisely what prevents her from carrying out “that necessary decentering,”²⁴ as Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun puts it. This position is also analyzed by Arthur Guezengar (2018). In *Imperialism*,²⁵ Arendt (2002 /1958) links Nazism and European colonialism by interpreting totalitarianism as a movement stemming from European colonialism and the partition of Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. Tied to European imperialism, racism is treated as an ideological tool used to explain colonial domination and legitimize its violence. However, she gives limited weight to the colonial structures established at the time of the “great discoveries”²⁶ in the sixteenth century, and then during the slave trade and slavery. She seems to downplay the importance of the racial question within colonial institutions and customs, neglecting the weight of the economic, social, and political stakes of race to come without, however, denying the significance of “race-thinking” and racism as “a powerful weapon for the destruction of those nations” (*Ibid.*, 419 /Arendt, 1958, 161). Arendt considers race through a lens of the history of nations without addressing its effects in contemporary political thought. Her conception of Africa as “a world of black savages”²⁷ does not allow her to recognize it as a site of political thought connected to Europe. In the chapter on “Race-Thinking Before Racism,” she does not address slavery as a key factor in the formation of an ideology capable of shaping European societies. She considers racism in relation to imperialism and the emergence of nationalism in the nineteenth century. But the period of colonial slavery is a crucial moment in the construction of racism—individual, collective, and structural—not only in terms of representation but also politics. This is evidenced by the *Code Noir*, established by Colbert in 1685 as a principle of segregation from 1738 to 1791, governed by a “Black Police” (*Police des Noirs*) in France, much like the *Code de l’Indigénat* (1881–1946) in the French colonial territories, and the differentiated treatment of citizenship between the French and Algerians. For Jean-Frédéric Schaub, the political history of race and the formation of racial categories

begins as early as the Middle Ages (Schaub 2015). According to Arendt, “even slavery, though actually established on a strict racial basis, did not make the slave-holding peoples race-conscious before the nineteenth century” (Arendt, *op. cit.*, 439 / Arendt 1958, 177). And yet, even if the theorization of race-thinking takes shape at the end of the eighteenth century, it serves, in fact, to legitimize the practices of capture, trafficking, and slavery that contributed to the enrichment of European countries. Race-thinking emerges as the logical consequence of centuries of domination, exploitation, and dehumanization within the context of colonial slavery, now recognized as a crime against humanity (cf. Loi 2001).

The difficulty of bringing race into being as a philosophical object, with the aim of devising new forms of political action, gives rise to forms of anger at the very heart of a new political philosophy, as Jean Peutêtre M’Pélé illustrates in his article “Arendt, Césaire, Nkrumah, le racisme et l’impérialisme” (in Caloz-Tschopp 2011). While Arendt ascribes philosophical value to compassion,²⁸ anger, just as it serves as a lever of political action, may too emerge as a mode of philosophical thought. Tassin proposed that we acknowledge this *tragique politique*, in which anger or indignation reveals itself as the expression of another kind of philosophical writing: the proposal of an “anti-colonial philosophy”²⁹ that runs through Norman Ajari’s *La dignité ou la mort. Éthique et politique de la race* (2019, “Dignity or Death: Ethics and Politics of Race”). Malcom Ferdinand, for his part, recounts that “anger”—the very first word of his book—was one of the impetuses for writing *Une écologie décoloniale. Penser l’écologie depuis le monde caribéen* (2019, “An Anti-colonial Ecology: Thinking Ecology from the Caribbean World”). It is, he says, “an anger at the way the Earth’s ecosystems are being destroyed; an anger at North/South injustices and at what is happening right now at Europe’s borders; an anger at the inequalities suffered by women; an anger at racism.”³⁰ This anger can be fruitful insofar as it enriches philosophical thought via political action and, in fueling reason, frees one from indifference toward the world.

Decolonizing Philosophy (Continuing Reflection)

Étienne Tassin developed a political philosophy aimed at resisting a particular vision of politics, specifically by formulating a *cosmopolitical* approach to counter migration policies and identity politics. His philosophy underscores the necessity of political action in response to the politicization of identities and a policing logic that undermines the possibility of a shared world. Tassin dedicated himself to the concept of *xenopolitics*, which views the foreigner as emblematic of the human condition, rather than as an object, as current

migration policies tend to do. His approach emphasizes the importance of maintaining a steadfast course toward a horizon that must always remain in view, within a context marked by an irreducible reality etched in the skin of many—and especially to those *others* for whom race and gender unjustly dictate an existence as what Norman Ajari terms “the experience of an undignified life.”³¹ In his recent book, *Noirceur: Race, genre, classe et pessimisme dans la pensée africaine-américaine au XXI^e siècle* (2022), Ajari revisits the idea of renewing French philosophy through Black studies and race studies in French academia. Tassin’s project then almost certainly foreshadowed a transformation of philosophical thought. Does the endeavor to decolonize philosophy enable us to move beyond the pitfalls of a cosmopolitics imbued with a perhaps overly theoretical universalism, as argued by Francophone philosophers such as Nadia Yala Kisukidi, Magali Bessone, Delphine Abadie, Seloua Luste Boulbina, Elsa Dorlin, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, and Norman Ajari, following the work of African, Latin American, and Anglo-American philosophers of the twentieth century? While Tassin articulates a highly pertinent, grounded approach to a political philosophy, others pursue this trajectory by gesturing toward and advocating for the decolonization of philosophy.

In France, the question of the decolonization of philosophy involves interrogating the very existence of an African philosophy and engaging with the paradigms linked to Africa and its diasporas. It is tied as well to the modes by which philosophy is institutionalized in non-European territories and to the demand for a “right to philosophy.”³² Yala Kisukidi argues that “what is at stake is detecting the secret or overt topologies of philosophy: its *birthplace* (Greece), its self-designated *spaces* of creation and expansion (Europe), its *deserts*—markers of an absence that philosophy, in a self-reflective gesture, deems either essential or accidental (Africa, the ‘rest of the world’).”³³ Just as the introduction of the concept of race refers to a social construct, a philosophy that originates from another space, from Africa (Bessone 2013), upends and displaces established paradigms and logic of thought, which is to say, it allows all philosophy to be apprehended differently.

Moreover, the endeavor of Magali Bessone’s work lies in analyzing the adverse effects that arise from the moral prohibition against contemplating the issue of race. By conducting a conceptual inquiry and philosophical analysis of the construction of social categories as they apply to the notion of race, she establishes a theoretical framework that enables the pragmatic use of the concept in combating racism. She situates herself within a political philosophy that seeks to analyze the historical development of the actual conditions of democracy and to transform current structures of domination with an aim

for emancipation and individual equality. Notably, she introduces into political philosophy the idea of transforming philosophy itself, wherein race is no longer a term that characterizes a reified otherness, but rather a paradigm for understanding the plurality of subjectivities within a newly conceivable shared space. In her article, “Décoloniser la philosophie politique” (“Decolonizing Political Philosophy”), Bessone employs the paradigm of Africa to explore how its inclusion “affects objects already constituted by political philosophy.”³⁴ To *philosophize from Africa*, or to *think with Africa*, as Souleymane Bachir Diagne observes in the introduction to Kodjo-Grandvaux (2013), “consists on the one hand in aiming at a form of decolonization of its institutionalized practices, and on the other in acknowledging an empirical, contextual grounding of political concepts and theories—amounting to a renunciation of the claim to an abstract universal”³⁵ Africa, like race, crystallizes two epistemic stakes. First, the *transformation* of concepts previously excluded from political philosophy. While race is not entirely absent from Enlightenment and nineteenth-century philosophy, it lacks the universal status granted to other concepts and which legitimizes them within philosophical thought. The task, then, is to understand what these new concepts contribute to discussions on the state, people, nation, liberty, equality, violence, citizenship, and justice. Second, Bessone highlights the *renewal* or *rediscovery* of the objects of political philosophy and therefore, what it reveals of a world in which relation to the other, the social relation, is intrinsically bound to colonial, racial, sexual, gender, and environmental factors. This approach reflects a commitment to necessarily situating philosophical thought within a historico-political context that conditions each subject’s position and imparts a singular meaning to the universality of concepts—a formation in which the question of universality is always linked to plurality and multiplicity.³⁶ Indeed, there is no articulation of the universal that does not simultaneously enunciate its own particularity (Ajari 2019. 156). Bessone advocates for a critical examination of the institutionalized philosophical canon and the marginalization of certain concepts within the philosophical discourse writ large. Philosophical writing—the practice of philosophy itself—can no longer eschew the “conditions under which ideals are produced in their diversity . . . themselves demanding an awareness of the effects of decentering.”³⁷ This vision of philosophy resonates with Anders Fjeld’s (2018) notion of the presupposition of equality as that which suspends the established order and opens up other “terrains of possibility”³⁸ experimental spaces of knowledge, perception, and capacities that constitute our shared world.

In response to the question “Can philosophy be decolonized?” Delphine Abadie³⁹ cites Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, who, in *Muntu in Crisis* (1977),⁴⁰ proposes

to “think against and with”⁴¹ the classical authors of Western philosophy in order to generate new configurations and new conceptual topographies that make possible a redefinition of philosophy’s uses. To illustrate the role of Western reason in epistemology, Ernest-Marie Mbonda invokes the image of “metonymic reason”:⁴² a phrase used by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014, 165) to describe a mode of reasoning that takes a part for the whole and presents itself as exclusive and universal, even though it is, in fact, only a specific rationality proper to a particular world (Mbonda 2019, 30). Decolonizing philosophy involves transgressing the traditional canons of the discipline and liberating thought from the hegemony of Western philosophy. This process affirms a right to difference and asserts a claim to the right to philosophy while calling for its opening up to the thought of others (Wiredu 2002). For Yala Kisukidi, to “decolonize philosophy” ultimately means “recognizing its impossible universalization”⁴³ and acknowledging the necessity of “fractured geographies” and the “redistribution of subjects.”⁴⁴

Conclusion

The question of action plays a major role in political philosophy, but its limits become apparent when the framework of thought doesn’t allow for the inclusion of all those who have been relegated to the margins. The fecundity of Étienne Tassin’s philosophy invites us to extend his reflection in new directions, both concerning the objects of philosophy and the method by which they are approached. By reconceptualizing political philosophy, he inverts what is traditionally treated as a problem, transforming it into the very paradigm of political thought, one that may further enrich postcolonial and anti-colonial theory. The exiled, the dominated, the oppressed, the excluded, the disinherited of history are not objects of politics, consigned to the margins, but the very agents of a politics that, without this qualification of the common, cannot truly be posed as a properly political question. This prompts us to rethink a history of philosophy by deterritorializing it, reconfiguring its conceptual concerns, and extracting it from the canon and a mode of thought that has become moribund. What results from this questioning of philosophical concepts is a disruption in the norms and values structuring communal life, one that opens onto a radicalization of the political order and a transformation of citizenship while also unveiling the way and the voice of new philosophical creations.

Pauline Vermeren is a research associate at the Laboratoire de Changement Social et Politique and lecturer at Université Paris Cité. She is also program director and vice-president of the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris.

James David Donahue is an MA graduate assistant of French and Francophone Studies in the department of Literatures, Cultures, and Languages at the University of Connecticut, Storrs.

NOTES

Originally Published as “Politique et action politique: Pour un renversement et un déplacement philosophique” in *Tumultes* 1–2 n° 58–59 (2022): 119–136. All translations from the original French citations are James Donahue’s except where a published translation is cited.

1. “Comme élément de systèmes de pensée incorporant toujours les enjeux sociaux, historiques et politiques dans lesquels il s’élabore.” [Author’s note: Bessone (2018, 508).]
2. *Décolonial*. Translated to “anti-colonial” to avoid confusion with the South American movement of decoloniality except where used in the verb form, “to decolonize.” In French, “decolonial” is a scientific and political movement; it’s not the same as “anti-colonial.”
3. “Par le bon bout” et de “raisonner correctement à propos des situations relatives à la politique que nous rencontrons ordinairement mais que nous devons réfléchir de manière non ordinaire.” [Author’s note: Tassin (2018, 15).]
4. “Qu’est-ce agir politiquement?”
5. “Saisir dans les actions elles-mêmes les raisons pour lesquelles celles-ci confèrent un sens à nos existences.”
6. [Author’s note: Étienne Tassin fait ici référence à l’ouvrage de Miguel Abensour (2006) (“Étienne Tassin makes a reference here to Miguel Abensour (2006)”).]
7. *Une vie dévouée à elle-même*, “une vie “d’actions plurielles”, de “solidarités de combat” ou encore “de luttes partagées.” [Author’s note: Tassin (2018, 5–6).]
8. “Piège Identitaire.” [Author’s note: Référence à Agier (2013).]
9. Author’s note: *La question du commencement est analysée par Hannah Arendt dans le chapitre premier “Sens de la révolution,” dans Essai sur la révolution* (This question is analyzed by Hannah Arendt in the first chapter of *On Revolution*, “The Meaning of Revolution”).]
10. “Maléfice de la vie à plusieurs.” In Merleau-Ponty (1947, xxxiv); in English, Merleau-Ponty (2022).
11. “L’acteur naît de ses actes au lieu d’y préexister” et que “l’action donne naissance à une communauté d’acteurs.”
12. “Qui agir produit-il ?” “On n’agit qu’en étant agi.” [Author’s note: *Ibid.*, 48.]

13. "Chaque fois que des acteurs agissent, ils font naître une scène en se donnant naissance à eux-mêmes sur cette scène."
14. [Author's note: Voir aussi l'interview d'Étienne Tassin par Aurore Mréjen, en 2016 (See also the interview of Étienne Tassin by Aurore Mréjen in 2016).]
15. "Des êtres anidentiques et non assignables, sans appartenances ni allégeance."
16. "La liberté d'action et celle de la parole peuvent se déployer aux yeux de tous, un espace d'apparence où chacun peut se révéler à soi-même et aux autres . . . au travers d'une action concertée."
17. [Author's note: Cf. l'espace coordonné par Camille Louis et Étienne Tassin (2019).]
18. "Quel mouvement commun est-il possible de mener avec les acteurs qui se sont servis de la confiance des citoyens pour défendre les intérêts des "bourgeois," avec les hommes d'affaires qui ne se soucient que des calculs comptables d'intérêts au détriment du grand nombre, aujourd'hui croupi dans la misère honteuse, dans l'indifférence et le mépris."
19. "Philosophie de terrain."
20. "Servir de guide aujourd'hui."
21. "Par le bon bout."
22. "...raisonner correctement à propos des situations relatives à la politique que nous rencontrons ordinairement mais que nous devons réfléchir de manière non ordinaire."
23. Arendt (1958, 183). [Author's note: Arendt ([1951] 2002, 448). Voir également (see also) Bentouhami (2008, 161–194).]
24. "D'opérer cet indispensable décentrement." [Author's note: Dayan-Herzbrun (2007, 149–161).]
25. Arendt (1958). [Author's note: Arendt, *op. cit.*]
26. "Grandes découvertes."
27. Arendt (1958, 191). [Author's note: *Ibid.*, 459. Les propos d'Arendt sur l'Afrique (461) sont particulièrement problématiques (Arendt's remarks on Africa are particularly problematic).]
28. [Author's note: Voir *Essai sur la Révolution* et les remarques préliminaires aux *Réflexions sur Little Rock*. (See *On Revolution* and the preface to "Reflections on Little Rock.")]
29. "Philosophie décoloniale."
30. "Une colère face à la manière dont on détruit les écosystèmes de la terre, une colère face aux injustices Nord/Sud et face à ce qu'il se passe aux portes de l'Europe en ce moment-même, une colère face aux inégalités faites aux femmes, une colère face au racisme." [Author's note: <https://podtail.com/fr/podcast/afrotopiques/malcom-ferdinand-penser-une-ecologie-decoloniale-u/>]
31. "L'expérience d'une vie d'indigne." [Author's note: Cf. Ajari, *op. cit.* *La dignité ou la mort. Éthique et politique de la race*, *op. cit.*]
32. "Droit à la philosophie." [Author's note: Kisukidi (2015, 93–98).]
33. "Il s'agit de déceler les topologies, secrètes ou avouées, de la philosophie : son lieu de naissance (la Grèce), ses espaces revendiqués de création et d'accroissement (l'Europe), ses déserts—mar-

queurs d'une absence que la philosophie, dans un mouvement autoréflexif, qualifie d'essentielle ou d'accidentelle (l'Afrique, le 'reste du monde').” [Author's note: Ibid., 84.]

34. “‘Fait’ à des objets déjà constitués par la philosophie politique.” [Author's note: Bessone (2015a, 29–36).]
35. “Consiste à viser une forme de décolonisation de ses pratiques institutionnalisées d'une part, et à admettre un ancrage empirique, contextuel, des concepts et théories politiques, valant renonciation à la prétention d'un universel abstrait, d'autre part.” [Author's note: Bessone (2015a, 29).]
36. [Author's note: Diagne (2018, 65).]
37. “Conditions de production des idéaux dans leur diversité . . . obligeant à être conscient des effets de décentrement.” [Author's note: Bessone (2015a, 36).]
38. “Paysages du possible.”
39. “La philosophie peut-elle se décoloniser ?” [Author's note: Abadie (2019, 14).]
40. Boulaga (1977). The English translation was published by Africa World Press in 2014, though there is a curious uncertainty over the identity of its translator: <https://adouloubitang.wordpress.com/2021/09/19/a-translator-case-preliminary-comments-on-fabien-eboussi-boulagas-muntu-in-crisis-i/>
41. “Penser contre et avec.”
42. “Raison métonymique.”
43. “‘Décoloniser la philosophie’ ce serait finalement ‘reconnaître son impossible universalisation.’” [Author's note: Kisukidi (2015, 83–98, 96).]
44. “‘Éclatement des géographies’ et la ‘redistribution des sujets.’”

REFERENCES

- Abadie, Delphine. 2019. « Introduction: Routes, détours et relecture postcoloniale de la philosophie africaine ». *Philosophiques* 46 (2): 279–298. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066771ar>
- Abensour, Miguel. 2006. *Hannah Arendt contre la philosophie politique ?* Paris: Sens & Tonka.
- Ajari, Norman. 2019. *La dignité ou la mort. Éthique et politique de la race*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Ajari, Norman. 2022. *Noirceur: Race, genre, classe et pessimisme dans la pensée africaine-américaine au XXI^e siècle*. Quimperlé: Divergences.
- Agier, Michel. 2013. *La condition cosmopolitique. L'anthropologie à l'épreuve du piège identitaire*. Paris: La Découverte. <https://doi.org/10.3917/dec.agier.2013.01>
- Arendt, Hannah. 1958 [1951]. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: The World Publishing Company.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1967. *Essai sur la révolution*. Paris: Gallimard; original in English, 1963.
- Arendt, Hannah. 2002. *Les origines du totalitarisme*. Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2002.
- Bentouhami, Hourya. 2008. « “Le cas de Little Rock.” Hannah Arendt et Ralph Ellison sur la question noire ». *Tumultes*, n°30: 161–194. <https://doi.org/10.3917/tumu.030.0161>

- Bessone, Magali. 2013. *Sans distinction de race ? Une analyse critique du concept de race et ses effets pratiques*. Paris: Vrin. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1023705ar>
- Bessone, Magali. 2015a. « Décoloniser la philosophie politique » *De(s)génération(s). Penser avec l'Afrique*, n°22: 29-36: 30.
- Bessone, Magali. 2015b. « Le vocabulaire de l'hospitalité est-il républicain ? », *Éthique publique* 17 (1). <https://doi.org/10.4000/ethiquepublique.1745>
- Bessone, Magali. 2018. "Les contextes de la race : une question normative." Centre Sèvres/*Archives de philosophie*, tome 81: 501-521. <https://doi.org/10.3917/aphi.813.0501>
- Bisiaux, Sophie-Anne. 2016. *Commun parce que divisé. Le monde à l'épreuve de l'étranger*, Actes de la recherche à l'ENS n°12. Paris: Éditions Rue d'Ulm/ Presses de l'École normale supérieure. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.editionsulm.5225>
- Boulaga, Fabien Eboussi. 1977. *La crise du Muntu*. Paris: Présence Africaine. English translation, Africa World Press in 2014: <https://adouloubitang.wordpress.com/2021/09/19/a-translator-case-preliminary-comments-on-fabien-eboussi-boulagas-muntu-in-crisis-i/>.
- Caloz-Tschopp, Marie-Claire. 2011. *Colère, courage et création politique, vol. 2, Acte du colloque international de théorie politique*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Dayan-Herzbrun, Sonia. 2007. « L'Afrique, monde fantôme et théâtre d'ombres ». In A. Kupiec, M. Leibovici, G. Muhlmann, É. Tassin, *Hannah Arendt. Crises de l'État-nation*, 149-161. Paris: Sens & Tonka.
- Diagne, Souleymane Bachir, and Jean-Loup Amselle. 2018. *En quête d'Afrique(s). Universalisme et pensée décoloniale*. Paris: Albin Michel.
- Dorismond, Edelyn. 2019. « Les mouvements sociaux haïtiens de juillet 2018 à nos jours et leurs fantômes. Notre impasse ». *Le National* (12 juin): http://www.lenational.org/post_free.php?elif=1_CONTENUE%2Ftribunes&rebmun=1023&fbclid=IwAR3F6ckuJi8sRBB0VZSAPCcyc4rx27jHxDaIDTH9OLuM_j6viTdTKF4n3us
- Ferdinand, Malcom. 2019. "Penser une écologie décoloniale, une écologie-du-monde." *Afrotopiques* (6 October): <https://www.r22.fr/antennes/afrotopiques/podcasts-afrotopiques/episode-7-malcom-ferdinand>.
- Fjeld, Anders. 2018. *Jacques Rancière. Pratiquer l'égalité*. Paris: Michalon.
- Guezengar, Arthur. 2018. « Arendt et la question raciale. Hannah Arendt, portrait d'une femme libre et engagée », Université Panthéon-Assas, fév. Paris, hal-01899829.
- Kisukidi, Nadia Yala. 2015. « Décoloniser la philosophie. Ou de la philosophie comme objet anthropologique ». *Présence Africaine*, n°192: 83-98. <https://doi.org/10.3917/presa.192.0083>
- Kisukisi, Nadia Yala. 2019. "Le 'Miracle grec.'" *Tumultes*, n°52: 103-126. <https://doi.org/10.3917/tumu.052.0103>
- Kodjo-Grandvaux, Séverine. 2013. *Philosophies africaines*. Paris: Présence Africaine Éditions, collection La philosophie en toutes lettres. <https://doi.org/10.3917/epa.kodjo.2013.01>
- Loi n° 2001-434 du 21 mai 2001 tendant à la reconnaissance de la traite et de l'esclavage en tant que crime contre l'humanité, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=LEGITEXT000005630984&dateTexte=vig>

- Louis, Camille, and Étienne Tassin. In *Mediapart* : <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/jungle-et-ville>
- Mbonda, Ernest-Marie. 2019. « La décolonisation des savoirs est-elle possible en philosophie ? ». *Philosophiques* 46 (2): 299–325. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066772ar>
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1947. *Humanisme et terreur*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2022. *Humanism and Terror*, translated by John O'Neill. London: Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/b23087>
- Mouffe, Chantal. 2013. *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. New York: Verso.
- Schaub, Jean-Frédéric. 2015. *Pour une histoire politique de la race*. Paris: Seuil.
- Sousa Santos, Boaventura de. 2014. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*. New York: Routledge.
- Tassin, Étienne. 2012. *Le maléfice de la vie à plusieurs. La politique est-elle vouée à l'échec ?* Montrouge: Bayard Éditions.
- Tassin, Étienne, 2014. « Subjectivation *versus* sujet politique. Réflexions à partir d'Arendt et de Rancière ». *Tumultes*, n°43: 157–173. <https://doi.org/10.3917/tumu.043.0157>
- Tassin, Étienne. 2018. *Pour quoi agissons-nous ? Questionner la politique en compagnie d'Hannah Arendt*. Lormont: Éditions Le bord de l'eau.
- Tassin, Étienne, and Aurore Mréjen. 2016. In *Les archives du présent* : <http://lcsp.univ-paris-diderot.fr/Etienne-Tassin-Comment-faire-monde-commun>.
- Vermeren, Pauline. "Politique et action politique: Pour un renversement et un déplacement philosophique." *Tumultes* n° 58–59, no. 1 (2022): 119–36. <https://doi.org/10.3917/tumu.058.0119>
- Vollaire, Christiane. 2017. *Pour une philosophie de terrain*. Paris: Créaphis.
- Wiredu, Kwasi. 2002. "Conceptual Decolonization as an Imperative in Contemporary African Philosophy : Some Personal Reflections," *Rue Descartes*, n° 36: 53–64. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rdes.036.0053>