



# Democracy of Breath and Fire: Irigarayan Meditations

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## Abstract

In this article, we are arguing for a possibility of a new elemental politics as based on breath and fire and gesturing beyond the modes and principles of ontology of violence, power struggles and war in philosophy and political philosophy. We first discuss the task of today's political philosophy as a need to enkindle the humanity towards a new alliance in creativity and belonging. We propose a new, elemental approach, based on the revitalization of air/breath and fire and present Luce Irigaray's thought as a key intervention of this kind within the contemporary political thought. The second part brings an analysis of texts by Ernst Jünger and Alain Badiou on soldiers and war as examples of an unfortunate philosophical adventure. The third part is our proposal for another genealogy of human beings as breathers and igniters within the new peaceful and mindful culture of democracy, providing us with a possibility of a new ethico-political order, as based on the elemental constellations of silence, breath and fire. Finally, the idea of a quiet democracy is established, as a place of inner horizontal calm being gathered and cultivated in us by fire, and as a place for beings of this Earth to breathe and to share the air within a new elemental-spiritual conspiracy of love. Towards the conclusion, this essay also is a homage to Luce Irigaray's approaches to ancient Indian religious and philosophical thinking.

**Keywords** Luce Irigaray · Alain Badiou · Ernst Jünger · Breathing · Air · Fire · Love · Quiet democracy · Anthropocene · Politicocene

## The Call for a New Democracy

This essay is an Irigarayan meditation on the future political philosophy—an attempt of a radical elemental political thinking for the future of humanity. More concretely, it is a meditation on forms of elemental democracy to come and to inhabit our

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life-worlds—as worlds being permeated by flames of violence and bad air of suffocating spaces and environments. The new politics we are searching for needs to become a place for the communal cohabitation beyond and away from the prevalent violent modes of power struggles, modes of machination, or even war. Luce Irigaray's vision of a future democracy without any doubt represents a key intervention into the political philosophy of today. In *Democracy Begins Between Two* in which democracy is regrounded through love, Irigaray argues about the political task of our age:

It is much more a case of reorganizing the way that humanity lives and produces with a view to preserving the planet, and human life and culture. In other words, of awakening consciousness to another stage in its becoming, which will allow us to begin building new ways of existing and thinking.<sup>1</sup>

Only such radical restructuring and awakening will enable us to respond to both crises we are witnessing in today's world: the environmental (the Anthropocene) and the political (the Politococene<sup>2</sup>). The task of today's political philosophy is to enkindle the humanity of different cultures, traditions and religions to join in alliance of creativity and belonging of a new kind. We must abandon the discourses of power struggles, battles and wars and their paradigms of death and begin with thinking anew about the future modes of being-together in ways that support and cherish our relational belonging, ethical affectivity and life. This essay is an attempt of looking into this utopian future in which political philosophy will be able to reopen and safeguard intersubjective spaces of belonging and love and protect the vulnerable inhabitants of our fragile world, including other living beings.

But how could fire and air/breath be related to this ethico-political task? Why precisely these two elements? For Feuerbach—who should be regarded as the main predecessor of Irigaray<sup>3</sup>—air or *pneûma* plays a crucial role in his natural philosophy of sensitivity. With *The Essence of Christianity* from 1841, we are for the first time in the modern history of Western philosophy witnessing the return to the elements (of air, water and, idiosyncratically, food) and the related rehabilitation of sensibility in philosophy within a new theory of intersubjectivity.<sup>4</sup> It is important to add

<sup>1</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Democracy Begins Between Two*, transl. Kirsten Anderson (London: The Athlone Press, Irigaray, 2000), 4 (first published in Italian in 1994 as *La democrazia comincia a due*).

<sup>2</sup> 'The Politococene' is our newly invented term, capturing the rule of Creons of our common world, incarnated in too many political leaders and their servants, and thus suppressing and annihilating the idea of democracy to an extent that democracy itself—like the planet Earth in the Anthropocene—has now become critically endangered and vulnerable to these external political conditions surrounding it.

<sup>3</sup> As we will see later, this relation establishes an idiosyncratic and, for academic philosophy, a nearly impossible elemental alliance between Feuerbach, Heidegger and Irigaray.

<sup>4</sup> See Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, transl. George Eliot (New York: Harper, Feuerbach, 1957); see also his 1846 book *The Essence of Religion*, transl. A. Loos (New York: Prometheus Books, Feuerbach, 2004), 2: 'Religion, thus understood, is as essential to man as light to the eye, as air to the lungs, as food to the stomach. Religion is the manifestation of man's conception of himself. But above all man is a being who does not exist without light, without air, without water, without earth, without food – he is, in short, a being dependent on Nature'. For more about Feuerbach's natural philosophy, see my *Breath of Proximity: Intersubjectivity, Ethics, and Peace* (Dordrecht: Springer, Škof, 2015), ch. 5.

that Feuerbach is also the first among the Western thinkers to announce and inaugurate the thinking of sexual difference within philosophy.<sup>5</sup> But on the other hand, it is also in 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of young Karl Marx that the human being (or, in his nineteenth-century vocabulary, still a ‘corporeal man’) is characterized not only as a ‘suffering, conditioned and limited being’, but also as a being, ‘breathing all the powers of nature’.<sup>6</sup> But this early respiratory alliance with nature is soon broken and forgotten and the elemental breath is abandoned and replaced by Marx with metaphors of a revolutionary practical activity—such as in his decisive and influential *Theses on Feuerbach* following in 1845.<sup>7</sup> This soon translates into violence and reincarnates over and over again in series of works until Žižek’s meditations on violence in his *In Defense of Lost Causes* and related works.<sup>8</sup> In these works, breath is forgotten and, as it were, delegated to the sensuousness as a part of *contemplation* only—and thus exiled from the terrain of practical and political activity. Intersubjective relations between two beings, forming not only a couple but also any society, and democracy, are abandoned and excluded from practical philosophy and thus from the realm of the political. It is with Irigaray’s work that a recovery of a sensuous intersubjectivity through the elements of air (breath) and fire (desire) as its constitutive parts becomes visible within political philosophy—as an education for democracy that is closer again to our affections, to our caring, and love, with horizontal transcendence as their common bond. An impulse that is contrary to various struggles for recognition modes and their explicit or implicit legacy throughout the history of thought. In any of these modes, we are always subjected to power relations dominated by conflict, whether within the subject (psychoanalysis) or between two subjects (struggle for recognition and agonistic politics), or between two cultures or religions. Ideologies of conflict with their avatars (gods, kings, political leaders) are thus fuelled by prestige only, power and violence. From Plato to Hegel, Western humanity (or, Western man) has been caught up in this structural paradox: any theory of subjectivity with its immanent ontology was aiming at something bigger than itself (such as state, culture, or religion) but it still stayed within the shell of its closed identity. In order to maintain this modality of being, Western man invented ideologies, gods and hierarchies, which he so ardently defended and followed throughout the history.<sup>9</sup> But in an emphatic observation of Bruno Latour

<sup>5</sup> See Ludwig Feuerbach, ‘Über Spiritualismus und Materialismus’, in: *Kritiken und Abhandlungen III, 1844–1866*, pp. 357–407 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, Feuerbach, 1975): ‘The real self is only a male or female self and in no way an asexual self, since sexual difference is not restricted to gender parts – only in this case would it be admissible to abstract it away – it penetrates to the bone, pervasive, boundless, neither does this difference begin “here” or end “there”. I think, I feel only as either man or woman.’ (396)

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, Marx, 1992), 389.

<sup>7</sup> See *The Marx Engels Reader*, ed. by Robert C. Tucker (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, The Marx Engels Reader, 1978), 143.

<sup>8</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London and New York: Verso, Žižek, 2008a). See also *Violence* (London: Prolific Books, Žižek, 2008b).

<sup>9</sup> Here, I refer to my thoughts from *Breath of Proximity*, see p. 3. See Laura Roberts’s excellent *Irigaray and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, Roberts, 2019) for Irigaray engaging with Hegel’s dialectical thinking, especially about the master/slave dialectic and for the impoverished and oppressive relations between men and women in the context of this thought. Roberts writes:

on Hegel and the geohistorical consequences of his thought, '[i]magine what he would have said if he had seen that the breath of Spirit in now overcome, suppressed, *aufgehoben*, intoxicated by carbon dioxide'.<sup>10</sup> And, in a way of reapproaching the elemental breath—in his recent essay, Achille Mbembe captures precisely this constellation by providing another possibility of thinking and doing radically different practical philosophies:

There is no doubt that the skies are closing in. Caught in the stranglehold of injustice and inequality, much of humanity is threatened by a great chokehold as the sense that our world is in a state of reprieve spreads far and wide. If, in these circumstances, a *day after* comes, it cannot come at the expense of some, always the same ones, as in the *Ancienne Économie* – the economy that preceded this revolution. It must necessarily be a day for all the inhabitants of Earth, without distinction as to species, race, sex, citizenship, religion, or other differentiating marker. In other words, a *day after* will come but only with a giant rupture, the result of radical imagination.<sup>11</sup>

These observations are an example of the direct connection of air and breath with fire in the eras of the Anthropocene and Politicocene as both elements are closely related to imagination—as indicated by Latour and Irigaray.

What kind of culture is related to the politics of fire? Either as a deity or a companion, fire has been present in human life for millennia: 'The place the hearth held in a home, that the prytaneum held for a city, or a vestal fire had within a culture, intellectual fire had for the universe of ideas'.<sup>12</sup> Uniting humans with the divine and also connecting humans with nature, fire as an elemental force featured both in its creative as well as in its destructive incarnations. But with the rise of the industrial age and related industrial growth, conditioned by the invention of the steam engine, the entirely new science of heat took shape and now also decisively took the priority over any earlier mythological, religious or philosophical appropriations or usages

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Footnote 9 (continued)

'Calling for a double dialectics, Irigaray is challenging the universal (masculine) subject of Hegel's philosophy to acknowledge his sexuate body, his sexuate self. Irigaray's demand for a double dialectics thus makes it possible for the feminine subject to begin to move from a place of repressed material substance towards a sexuate subjectivity'. (89)

<sup>10</sup> Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity Press, Latour, 2019), 39. We may add that contrary to Latour's remark, breath actually never was related to the life of Hegel's Spirit.

<sup>11</sup> Achille Mbembe, 'The Universal Right to Breathe', *Critical Inquiry* 47 (Winter, Mbembe, 2021): 58–62 (transl. Carolyn Shread). This view is contrary to what Žižek claims about the meaning of history: it cannot come at the expense of either victims (of what is regarded as act of divine violence and terror thus justified) or individuals and collectives as a collateral damage of this history. See Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, 162: '[...] Benjaminian "divine violence" should be conceived as divine in the precise sense the old Latin motto *vox populi vox dei*: not in the perverse sense of "we are doing it as mere instruments of the People's Will", but as the heroic assumption of the solitude of a sovereign decision. It is a decision (to kill, to risk or lose one's own life) made in absolute solitude, with no cover from the big Other'.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen J. Pyne, 'Fire in the mind: changing understandings of fire in Western civilization', *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences*, Vol. 371, No. 1696 (Pyne, 2016): 1–8.

of fire. Similar to Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and the triumphalism of the Spirit over any remaining elemental or natural atmospheres of breathing, the new Capitalist regime of heat energy suffocated elemental fire and inaugurated a new era in which fire had become alienated to human beings and thus detached from the once co-shared elemental core of affectivity, imagination and love. With the new regime, fire now ignites and supports mass production and accompany wars and, ultimately, concurs in destructive processes related to atmo-terrorism or air itself becoming the weapon—as portrayed by Sloterdijk as the decisive marking of the dawn of the twentieth century—the century of violence.<sup>13</sup> *The need for the protection of elements fire and air*—for letting them to be in their elemental being—and thus the need for the protection of life on Earth was never greater as it is today. The decision of whether we are able to imagine the post-Anthropocene and post-Politicocene era is related to this task; the stakes are high and the fate of the Earth and of the humanity is yet to be decided.

In *Sharing the Fire*, which is the most recent of her books on the elements, Irigaray now asks: 'Does the subjectivity which underpinned our culture correspond with our real being?'<sup>14</sup> What we need in this uncertain era is a capability of an imagination for the cohabitation within the newly invented spaces of the political: a new world needs to be reinvented from the most intimate layers both of our selves and of our bodies. It is a quiet inauguration of a future breathful world of flaming love—an atmosphere of democracy that appreciates and safeguards life and peace over struggle, and love over violence and death. For Irigaray, nothing is more important in this task than to be able to safeguard and protect the genealogies of mothers and daughters—as protectrices of matrixial identity and mediatrices of a way of life and mild gestures of proximity.<sup>15</sup>

## The Genealogies of Warriors and Soldiers

The combat is not only an annihilation, but also the masculine form of procreation.<sup>16</sup>

According to us, the two key questions in philosophy (both in its theoretical and practical aspects) always remained the same: why were so many male philosophers such devoted guardians of a destructive, violent and suffocating power? How was it possible to nourish these impulses from the very dawn of the Western

<sup>13</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, Sloterdijk, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the Fire* (New York: Palgrave, Irigaray, 2019), 1. The other main books of Irigaray dealing with the four elements are: *Elemental Passions* (earth), *Marine Lover* (water) and *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (air).

<sup>15</sup> See on this my *Antigone's Sisters: On the Matrix of Love* (New York: SUNY Press, Škof, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Ernst Jünger, *Betrachtungen zur Zeit / Samtliche Werke 9, Essays 1* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, Jünger, 2015), 50. The excerpt is from the 1922 essay 'Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis' ('Combat as an Internal Experience'). In the original the excerpt reads: 'Der Kampf ist nicht nur eine Vernichtung, sondern auch die männliche Form der Zeugung'.

civilization—if we remember the tragic fate of Antigone as a consequence of her protective ethical deed? We have seen in our previous section that it is the task of humanity as a whole to abandon the discourses of power struggles, battles and wars and their paradigms of death and begin with thinking anew about the future modes of being-together in ways that support and cherish belonging, affectivity and life. Now, there is nothing more far away from this idea than Ernst Junger's 'wartime' texts which also are among the most disturbing philosophical texts ever written (*Combat as an Internal Experience, Fire and Movement, Total Mobilization, On Pain*, etc.). But already in 1915, Sigmund Freud wrote a piece entitled *Thoughts for the Times of War and Death* in which he affirmed that we need to rehabilitate 'death' as a phenomenon—being in his opinion repressed and rejected from the realm of life.<sup>17</sup> In his work entitled *The Genius of War and the German War* (also from 1915), Max Scheler also already distinguished between war as a dynamic principle and peace as a static principle of history and saw peace as the greatest threat to the vitality of the society. To this group of thinkers of the German *meditatio mortis* era, we can also add Oswald Spengler and Carl Schmitt. Even Karl Jaspers, discussing the ideology of war as late as in 1932, praises death as the only thing that a genuine life desires.<sup>18</sup>

Jünger, in *Combat as an Internal Experience* (1922), dignifies war in a secularised Heraclitian manner as the father of all things. The philosopher of war writes from the perspective of an extreme form of a *father-son* genealogy: war, for him, is our father and from war have become what we are—the combat is the most decisive feature of our *Dasein*. The war is our natural law (*Naturgesetz*), and to live means to be able to kill, or directly in Jünger's words: 'Leben heißt toten'.<sup>19</sup> War, which is *internal* to human beings, for Jünger, is sacred and even decisive for the future fate of humanity, with his euphoric words:

The struggle is still a sacred thing, a divine judgment over two ideas. It is up to us to stand in for our cause sharper and sharper, and so the struggle is our ultimate reason and only what is hard-won is our true possession. [...] What is revealed as an apparition here in battle will tomorrow be the axis around which life is whirring faster and faster.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, in the death of a soldier, the fate of a life is confirmed: death in a combat even stands as a name for 'faith, love, hope and highest aim'.<sup>21</sup> Similar to

<sup>17</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 10 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, Freud, 1969).

<sup>18</sup> See on this epoch Charles Bambach, *Heidegger's Roots: Nietzsche, National Socialism and the Greeks* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, Bambach, 2003), 127ff. For more on this epoch as related to Heidegger's legacy see chapter 6 of my *Breath of Proximity*.

<sup>19</sup> Jünger, 'Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis', 42.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 49 and 73; in German: 'Der Kampf ist immer noch etwas Heiliges, ein Gottesurteil über zwei Ideen. Es liegt in uns, unsere Sache schärfer und schärfer zu vertreten, und so ist der Kampf unsere letzte Vernunft und nur Erkämpftes wahrer Besitz. [...] Was hier im Kampfe als Erscheinung sich offenbart, wird morgen die Achse sein, um die das Leben schneller und scheller schwirrt'. I thank Primož Debenjak for translating this excerpt.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

Heidegger's glorifying meditations on the death of one of his students as expressed in his unfortunate 1941 letter to the mother of a fallen German soldier, this death is recognized and characterized as an expression of 'the most beautiful fate.'<sup>22</sup> This perverted *antimatricial* order of things is captured by Tine Hribar in his *The Gift of Being*: here, Hribar argues in a truly Irigarayan manner that each one of us receives the gift of being from her/his mother, and if this gift is connected to the even more original *gift of Being itself*, then perceiving death as a kind of a sacrificial gift (a *gift of War*, as it were) ought to be seen as a gesture that refers to the perversion of the ontological order of being, caught in a structure that we have yet to fully investigate.<sup>23</sup> War separates men from their mothers, sisters, even from their children (real or imagined): the ontology of war prevails over the idea of life, birth, natality, and femininity. And in war, there is no place for breath and fire apart from the logic of combat: this cannot be expressed in a clearer way—namely, in Jünger one's breathing intensifies and magnifies in a battle ('daß da der Atem schneller weht'<sup>24</sup>); and the ancestral fire of their fathers is glowing in his soldiers.

Now, Jünger may have one of his twenty-first-century closest allies in Alain Badiou and his search for a new heroic figure within political philosophy.<sup>25</sup> In describing the task of philosophy and in his listings of the tasks of main philosophers, Badiou cannot evade the fate of nearly all Western thinkers—his list consists exclusively of male philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to Derrida, Žižek and Badiou himself—forming thus the usual *philosophical fraternity*. In this unfortunate conspiracy, Derrida is mentioned as one, who was able to address the importance of the feminine dimension, but the tone of the book quickly returns to the unfortunate mode of the positioning of philosophy over the idea of democracy. For Badiou, who does not want to mention Irigaray (who, it is true, also does not want to mention Badiou in her works), the priority of democracy over philosophy (as in Rorty) leads to a form of relativism and is thus damaging for the type of philosophy that Badiou wishes to inaugurate: for him, justice is more important than freedom, and philosophy must be dissolved into a clearly *anti-democratic* and (violent) emancipatory politics of a Badiouian kind:

Nevertheless, we ought to recognize that philosophy's guilt is relative to this: that a disaster is better than a lack of being (*mieux vaut un désastre qu'un désêtre*). However terrorist, sacralized and ecstatic it may be, because a politics sutured to philosophy at least falls under an idea, the philosopher will always

<sup>22</sup> See Rüdiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, transl. E. Osers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Safranski, 1999), 328.

<sup>23</sup> See Tine Hribar, *Dar biti* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, Hribar, 2003). For the antimatrixial orders within philosophy, religion and ethics see my *Antigone's Sisters*.

<sup>24</sup> Jünger, 'Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis', 13.

<sup>25</sup> Alain Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*, transl. Bruno Bostels (London and New York: Verso, Badiou, 2012). This book was first published in 2011 under the title *La relation énigmatique entre philosophie et politique* as an attempt of 'inventing a creative new linkage between philosophers and militants' (ix; Translator's Foreword). Despite arguing for another genealogical linkage of the word 'militants' through 'mile-goers' (from the Latin *miles* and *mill(ia)-ites*), this book still is, as also is the case with Badiou's friend Žižek, an apology of the violent modes within the political thought.

prefer it – as ultimately, in the *élan* of the centuries, will *all of* humanity – to a politics that is evacuated of all thought, and whose excessive management calls only for the petty exacerbation of interests.<sup>26</sup>

Again, one must accept the sacrifices (as in Žižek) and resist the democratic or philosophical sense of the political. In search for the new sense of the political in these disoriented times, Badiou returns to the idea of heroism and now wishes to install a new heroic figure beyond war—but the preparation for this heroic figure comes precisely from the idea of a soldier. Here stands the argument:

The great problem is to create a paradigm of heroism beyond war, a figure that would be neither that of the warrior nor that of the soldier, without for this reason returning to Christian pacifism, which is only the passive form of sacrifice.<sup>27</sup>

We may ask: is Badiou therefore willing to say farewell to war as a political principle? Is the *condition* of love stronger than what defines the enigmatic relation of philosophy and politics? In interpreting Gerard Manley Hopkins and his poem ‘The Soldier’, the spirit (sic!) of war from the poem is understood and explained as ‘the extension of human capabilities, beyond risk, beyond death’.<sup>28</sup> The soldier is the one who actually transfigures humanity, and ‘this is because, in the deed of the soldier, we obtain something eternal—exactly as in the death of Christ, we have the Resurrection, the new life’.<sup>29</sup> Soldier, a man, evidently, and not a woman(-mother), is represented as one, symbolising the grace of life—now in another poem by Wallace Stevens from the collection of poems *Transport to Summer*: in a distorted reading of Badiou, the wounds and deaths of many soldiers are now compared to a sign of an ‘affirmative mediation between life and death’.<sup>30</sup> In a way of salvific culmination of the idea of the man-soldier—and thus in his own form of *meditatio mortis*—both fire and air appear in the midst of this poetico-political world: through his death, the soldier now *breathes a summer sleep*, but in this summer sleep, he still is untouched by death: a mystery in the midst of a war. It is our task now *to find a new sun*, for Badiou, a new horizon of *being* both within as well as beyond the horizons of the heroic deeds and deaths of soldiers. For Irigaray in her *Sharing the Fire*, it became obvious that above all, fire concerns the desire and that ‘[d]esire is our internal fire, internal sun’.<sup>31</sup> It seems that, finally, also Badiou’s ship resorts to the harbour of this thought. Namely, in the concluding part of *Philosophy for Militants*, Badiou searches for and envisages this new politics beyond both the opposition between desire (understood as revolutionary politics) and law (understood as reactionary politics, or liberalism). He calls this position a non-expressive dialectics and relates it to the new political courage and new fictions to be imagined—the

<sup>26</sup> Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, transl. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, Badiou, 2008), 159.

<sup>27</sup> Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*, 46.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>31</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the Fire* (New York: Palgrave, Irigaray, 2019), 5.



aim now is to find *another* composition of the political field. But how could another composition be imagined based on the ideas of warriors, soldiers and the inheritance of violence that accompanied these incarnations of grand historical fictions? Badiou himself opens this question unanswered in a way of an expectation, perhaps even prayer, but not without doubt:

[I]t is possible, possible, possible, it must be possible. Perhaps. We hope, we must hope that it will be possible to find the possibility of our new fiction.<sup>32</sup>

Badiou's words indicate his expectation to find a new constellation within the political field he inhabits and guards. But let us try to point beyond this possibility by looking into a different kind of an ethico-political genealogy, one based on breath and fire as gatherers and supporters of our longing for humanity towards solidarity and peace.

According to Irigaray, the new humanity will only be reborn from the body, heart, breath, listening, speech and mind—and this will materialize through an exchange of relational gestures.<sup>33</sup> It is a being-together in a new way, beyond the existing modes and forms of democracy, but firstly beyond violence as a political or historical ruling principle and endless victims—children, mothers, sisters, father and brothers—as merely means justifying the ends. In our world ruled by too many Creons, democracy still needs to represent an idea of an ethical community, both breathful and ignacious by affectionate desire, as it were. Democracy is without doubt endangered and is more and more becoming a hostage to the rise of media populism, the interests of giant tech companies and transnational financial institutions, and the pressure of rising populist tendencies and regimes. Democracy as an idea is thus caught in the fringes of extremely strong anti-democratic tendencies and needs to become revived as a practice in elemental affectivity, cohabitation and achieving peace.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 80. In one of my previous analyses of Badiou's and Žižek's politics, I have tried to discuss the following weird paragraph of Žižek: [...] in contrast to Nazism and American capitalism, it was only Soviet Communism which, despite the catastrophe it stands for, *did* possess true inner greatness [...] Here, we should follow Badiou, who claims that, despite the horrors committed on its behalf (or, rather, on behalf of the specific form of these horrors), Stalinist Communism was inherently related to a Truth-Event (of the October Revolution) while Fascism was a pseudo-event, a lie in the guise of authenticity. Badiou refers here to the difference between *désastre* (the Stalinist 'ontologisation' of the Truth-Event into a positive structure of Being) and *désêtre* (the Fascist imitation/staging of a pseudo-event called 'Fascist Revolution'): *mieux vaut un désastre qu'un désêtre* [...] Stalinism did not sever the last thread that linked it to civilisation. The lowest Gulag inmate still participated in the universal Reason: he had access to Truth of History (Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge: MIT Press, Žižek, 2006, 285f., 291). According to Žižek, we have to begin from the beginning—i.e. we have 'to descend to the starting point and choose a different path' (Slavoj Žižek, 'How to Begin from the Beginning', *New Left Review* 57, Žižek, 2009, 51). For him, this return is closely related to Lenin and is characterized by paraphrasing Beckett's words from *Worstward Ho*: 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better' (Ibid., 45) For us, the possibility of a return, if it exists, must be related towards enhancing of our most intimate layers and elemental gestures—such as silence, breath, and desire, and heart as a place of our sensibility and peaceful affectivity.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Luce Irigaray, *A New Culture of Energy: Beyond East and West*, transl. Stephen D. Seely, Stephen Pluháček and Antonia Pont (New York: Columbia University Press, Irigaray, 2021). For an elaboration on listening, see Maja Bjelica, 'Listening, Language, Silence', *Horizon* 10:1 (Bjelica, 2021), 212–231.

## Democracy, Breath, Fire: a New Conspiracy of Love

Not only does our culture not teach us how to cultivate breathing to assure our existence in an autonomous way, but it does not make known to us that becoming spiritual amounts to transforming our elemental vital breath into a more subtle breath at the service of loving, of speaking and hearing, of thinking. Too often we confuse cultivation and spirituality with the learning of words, of knowledge, of competences. We have forgotten that to be cultivated amounts to being able to breathe, not only in order to survive, but in order to constitute a reserve of breath as a soul that helps us to transform our natural life into a spiritual life.<sup>34</sup>

As a physiological process, breath essentially supports life of any living being and has a natural, cultural and social meaning. Embodied breathing installs the very beginning of a new life and signals the arrival of an autonomous and free-living being. We all are parts of various atmospheric relations, constituting a living, breathing web, experiencing connected feelings of contentment and discontentment throughout our embodied lives. Any breathing being needs her own free space to breathe—an envelope or atmosphere in which she is free and which is not possessed by anything or anyone. Around the living breathing being, breathing gathers a sphere of air, called an elemental atmosphere and *being-in-the-air* is the most elemental way of our being-in-the-world. According to David Kleinberg-Levin, ‘breathing is our very first teaching—a silent teaching—in a life of interdependency, continuity, relationship, giving and receiving’.<sup>35</sup> We may call this way of being as living in the *atmosphere of respiratory solidarity* with nature and others. Without sufficient air, living beings are exposed in their most basic vulnerability—aerial one, and suffocate under deadly environmental or socio-political conditions. We need to be able to imagine a world in which there is a provision of a future time when masculine ontologies, based on various erections of power, with accompanying theological and philosophical immobilizations of the body and the femininity have lost their immanent power and are replaced with another ontology—a relational one, more attuned to the call of the other through shared co-breathing, or a new conspiracy of love.

The introduction of breath into the politics and the possibility of a new breath-politics that could imply political change has recently become one of the most pressing issues. Political activism around the *I can't breathe* campaigns as associated with the Black Lives Matter movement and deaths of Eric Garner and George Floyd show convincingly the power of breath in imagining the future non-oppressive politics, moving towards a more just and more solidaristic respiratory environments and atmospheres. But even before the *I can't breathe* movement, we can trace an example of making a breathful democracy in Liberia by Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace and Leymah Gbowee as the main voice of this movement. In 2011,

<sup>34</sup> Luce Irigaray, ‘Ethical Gestures Toward the Other’, in: Lenart Škof (ed.): *Ethical Gestures* (Ljubljana: Nova revija, Irigaray, 2010), 3f.

<sup>35</sup> Lenart Škof and Petri Berndtson, *Atmospheres of Breathing* (New York: SUNY Press, Škof & Berndtson, 2018). 10.

Leymah Gbowee was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize together with President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Tawakkul Karman for their peaceful fight for justice. In a beautiful essay on war and peace titled ‘Breathing the Political: A Meditation on the Preservation of Life in the Midst of War’,<sup>36</sup> Elisha Foust presents us with an example of an Irigarayan politics as based on breath, prayer, care for life and silence, enabling to bring a real change into the community being previously caught in the midst of a war, with the extreme sexual violence and violence against children, and an inherent religious conflict as its constituent parts. But how can breath become a part of the democracy? According to Elisha Foust, ‘[b]reath-as-prayer is a communal and therefore political event. It can inspire political change’.<sup>37</sup> Based on Irigaray’s teaching on an active and conscious breath leading both to an enhanced awareness of our singularity and identity as well as to our communal belonging, the political dimension of breath reveals the hidden but powerful presence of a respiratory element among us, being almost entirely forgotten in the Western philosophical tradition. Liberian women were able to bring community breath into the politics by their radically peaceful ethical intervention into the very core of the genealogy of war, an intervention based on forgiveness and love. Praying and intervening with their presence through a series of community events, the Liberian women managed to employ their breathing in an enhanced political way. What is perhaps crucial for our evaluation of the role of breath in an ethical regrouping of the idea of democracy is its ability to reveal our common vulnerability which quietly links the community with a bond that anyone can understand. Breath links the body to the soul, and it also gestures to our common and hidden ethical core—spanning across the individuals, sexes, cultures, races and also all living beings. Breath here relates to what Heidegger understood with the *silent mildness of Beyng (Seyn)* beyond pure machination and power: without this gesture, one keeps appropriating or annihilating the other and this insight into the essence of machination and power marks the end of metaphysics as such.<sup>38</sup> Any regrouping of the political must take into account this ontological gesture, which gestures at the ontologico-ethical proximity of Heidegger and Irigaray.

If according to John Dewey, democracy in its generic social sense is the idea of community life itself,<sup>39</sup> then respiratory democracy is a space of preservation of a life in which our common task becomes to safeguard the vulnerability and precarity of any single breath in one of its incarnations—in an intersubjective, communal or environmental way. With the respiratory element in politics, we are now arriving at the very threshold of an idea of quiet democracy. In *A New Culture of*

<sup>36</sup> This essay is a part of a volume, entirely dedicated to the topic of breath in Irigaray’s philosophy. See Lenart Škof and Emily A. Holmes (eds.), *Breathing with Luce Irigaray* (London: Bloomsbury, Škof & Holmes, 2013), ch. 12.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>38</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Die Geschichte des Seyns*, ed. by Peter Trawny (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, Heidegger, 1998), 69: ‘Herrschaft ist die *χάρις* des Seyns als des Seyns, stille Würde der milden Bindung, die sich nie in das Bedürfen der Macht zu versteifen braucht’.

<sup>39</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, Dewey, 1954), 148.

*Energy* Irigaray defines this new task awaiting us as one in which the world of a feminine subjectivity will be revealed, and in which it will be possible for a man to resolve his inherited conflict with the mother, with Earth, and with his own natural identity. This gesture will enable us to imagine a new future community, based on an available reserve of breath. This reserve of breath is one of the most important features of respiratory democracy-to-come:

To become aware of the fact that our life exists thanks to our own breathing is essential for making us autonomous living persons. But we cannot live only at the level of elementary vitality like an infant at the beginning of his or her existence. We must take charge of our life and transform it into a human existence. This requires us to maintain and develop our breathing and also to provide ourselves with a reserve of available breath: a soul, which enables us not to let our breathing be dependent only on the immediate necessities that are imposed upon us. Indeed, this is the first sense of the word *soul*.<sup>40</sup>

In almost all mythologies and religions of the world, we find a cosmological myth or narrative related to breath energy or breathing, giving us the spiritual guidance and, as it were, the reserve of breath we first need for keeping and maintaining ourselves in our self-affection, and then for sharing with others in our compassion. Either in the form of 'wind', 'air', 'cosmic breath' or 'spirit', this substance is the essential link between microcosmic and macrocosmic realities, between immanence (our body) and transcendence (other), enabling finite human beings to access other spiritual beings, cosmos and its gods, ultimately, to become spiritual and express in themselves the infinite. Now, in its ontological sense, the reserve of breath marks the very threshold of our subjectivity: it is what guarantees the autonomy of our soul before it could be appropriated or seized by any of the external factors. Ultimately, the reserve manifests in a redemptory role of both Jesus and Buddha, as they first shared their vital spiritual breath with few women and men—their closest respiratory allies and friends in the intimacy of an archaic respiratory community—and later within a new community (*ekklesia/sangha*) of breathers.

The reserve of breath enables our souls and our bodies to nourish the most precious endowments that we have: a possibility of an original place for a breath, being available for the arising of mild gestures of mindfulness, meditation, prayer, listening and silence—the key elements of an Irigarayan-based *quiet democracy*—a future place in which struggle for recognition and related modalities of violence are weakened in their incessant ontological drive and in which rather love emerges from desire, as enveloped and protected by silence:

As our world is above all built with the help of language, silence must be the speaking of the threshold. It is thanks to silence that we can leave our own world and meet the other as other. [...] Silence announces to the other that we preserve a space outside of ourselves and of our world to let the one who is coming arrive. It is the laying out of a space-time that must remain virgin in

<sup>40</sup> Irigaray, *A New Culture of Energy*, 20.

order for a meeting to happen. It is openness that nothing occupies or preoccupies – no language, no values, no pre-established truth. [...] Silence must be preserved before meeting the other as a place in which his, or her, otherness can be welcomed.<sup>41</sup>

Irigaray argues for a new culture of energy that is not aggressive and combative anymore. Based on the highest ethical traditions of the East and of the West, the task for Irigaray now is of letting others be in her alterity, and of letting her be incarnated ethically and intersubjectively in a future beyond harm, and beyond the vulnerability and exposure of any human being towards others.<sup>42</sup> Based on these thoughts, respiratory democracy is now understood as care and respect for the spiritual breath of the other, and care and respect for the vital breath—life of the other. But from vulnerability and exposure towards others and towards nature, it follows that respiratory democracy must be critical and thus able to respond to what is called ‘distribution’ in Timothy Choy’s excellent intervention, reaching to broader atmospheric conditions of our everyday interactions with air and breath. In his words:

Distribution is a trigger word for an atmospheric conspiracy, a commitment to breathing together, from and in an unequally shared milieu, an unevenly constituted planetary medium for respiration where concentrations of well- and unwell-being accumulate, sometimes quickly and sometimes slowly. [...] Thinking conspiracy literally, what political forms might transpire from an assembly caught in and metabolically dependent upon an atmospheric uncommons? The political problem of reckoning with being together, with the possibilities and impossibilities of *breathing with* in late industrial, racializing, engineered worlds, might be posed thus: what is conditioning the differential distribution of the difficulties or impossibilities of breath for particular forms of life? It is hard to breathe in many places – in some places more than others, for some bodies more than others.<sup>43</sup>

We have now arrived to the main problem of our idea of democracy of breath and fire: we inhabit spaces of unevenly constituted planetary medium for respiration. The political sphere today has become a space of personal, social and environmental suffocation and a space in which all-consuming fire of blind political affectivity reigns. This situation demands a response from us that could enhance our future intersubjective, socially political and broadly communal lives (including the aspect of our community with nature) to become ignited by flaming love, as it were, and providing of less suffocating conditions for a future mindful democracy. And this task is related precisely to the logic of self-affection, and fire as desire.

Irigaray’s greatest invention in philosophy is without doubt the introduction of an idiosyncratic dialectical *dyad* into the very core of ontology and epistemology. This

<sup>41</sup> Irigaray, ‘Ethical Gestures Toward the Other’, 9–10.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, see ch. ‘Più che non nuocere: amare’.

<sup>43</sup> Timothy Choy, ‘Distribution’, in: Cymene Howe & Anand Pandian (eds.), *Anthropocene Unseen: A Lexicon* (Pulchrum Books, Choy, 2020), 106. URL: <https://punctumbooks.com/titles/anthropocene-unseen-a-lexicon/>

dyad is always formed by two, who are different (sexual difference is here understood as an ontological paradigm, and clearly not as a call to heteronormativity), and not united by any genealogy or hierarchy. Self-affection in Irigaray teaches us to become two, without appropriating or annihilating the other as other, or without being alienated from our own becoming in subjectivity. The becoming of subjectivity through the cultivation of self-affection also refers to a logic of difference between the masculine and feminine world(s), since men and women have different accesses to maternal genealogies, to the rhythms of nature, and to sexual becoming and belonging through mutual desire and love. We breathe the same air, but we breathe it differently. We all want to achieve our humanity, but we can only achieve it dialectically—by respecting our differences in an intersubjective sense. In Irigaray, this dialectics of intersubjectivity always already is a political gesture and is thus inherently related to the generic idea of democracy. In her *Sharing the Fire*, this is related to the element of fire. This element acts as a transition from the natural to the spiritual state and is related to the mediation of desire—it contributes to the growth and attraction. Desire relates to the ‘transcendental intuition in search for truth’ and guides us through a ‘dynamic mediation between the subjective and the objective both in the self and between the selves’.<sup>44</sup> But why is the flame of desire so decisive for a new culture of democracy? The answer resides in a lack of natural energy which conditions various compensations—from externally constructed ideals and rules to various transcendent beings or gods—instead of longing for an incarnate transcendence,<sup>45</sup> we instead wanted to secure our grounding through various externalizations of our initial desire and longing. In ancient Upanishadic thought, it is *tapas* (as heat, fire and fervour) that represents this desire and this longing. In an ancient cosmogonical sense, it is revealed as fire when Death and Hunger alone reigned over the creation as deities, even before the first elements were born: but now, when Death ‘had become worn out by toil and hot with exertion, his heat—his essence—turned into fire’.<sup>46</sup> Later, this fire is understood as the ascetic fervour (also religious austerity) or internal desire also in Yoga. In Upanishadic thought, it is a sign of the search of Brahmins for the immense and unborn self (*mahān ātmā*), the ruler and controller of all, and residing within the heart. This immense self is the guardian of all creatures, it is breathing beyond breathing; ultimately, it reveals as *brahman*, the first and the foremost, the guardian of truth. The desire for self-affection can therefore only reside within the heart. In an even more ancient Vedic Creation hymn from the *Rksamhitā*, *tapas* reveals as the most ancient cosmogonic force. It is positioned even before ‘That One’ (*tad ekam*) which ‘breathed without wind’ can appear as the first cosmogonic principle at all—as stated in the following verse: ‘[T]hat One was born by the power of heat’.<sup>47</sup> This means that both internal heat and

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Irigaray, *Sharing the Fire*, 88.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>46</sup> *Upaniṣads*, transl. Partrick Olivelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Upaniṣads, 1996), 8 (*Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*, 1.2.2).

<sup>47</sup> *The Rgveda*, Vol. III, transl. Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, *The Rgveda*, 2014), 1609.

internal breath reside enveloped in primeval cosmogonical silence—and that they precede and in fact enable our speech and our thought.

Let us here look at the first three stanzas of this Vedic hymn from the cca. tenth-century BCE:

1. The nonexistent did not exist, nor did the existent exist at that time.  
There existed neither the airy space nor heaven beyond.  
What moved back and forth? From where and in whose protection? Did water exist, a deep depth?
2. Death did not exist nor deathlessness then. There existed no sign of night nor of day.  
That One breathed without wind by its independent will. There existed nothing else beyond that.
3. Darkness existed, hidden by darkness, in the beginning. All this was a signless ocean  
What existed as a thing coming into being, concealed by emptiness – that One was born by the power of heat.<sup>48</sup>

The internalization of desire is thus marked by an ancient idiosyncratic cosmico-ontological composition of silence, breath and fire, and points towards its universal relevance. In *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, the first philosophical book on the element of fire, Gaston Bachelard now offers the following thoughts on fire, being in the closest vicinity to ancient Indian Vedic and Upanishadic, but also Irigarayan constellations:

Fire is the ultra-living element. It is intimate and it is universal. It lives in our heart. It lives in the sky. It rises from the depths of the substance and offers itself with the warmth of love.<sup>49</sup>

With the help of air and fire, we can therefore arrive to the most elemental layers of our self and discover the path of our future self-affection—from the heath as an ontological core of our Being. As long as fire concerns the desire for recognition, or the flames of violence and war in any of their manifestations, it will not be possible to construct a new culture of democracy, based on elemental affectivity—protective towards life, letting be our vital and spiritual breath, and keeping the internal fire alive.

Democracy needs to become ignited by a new self-affection so as to become a democracy of flaming love, and by providing peaceful breathing within the political

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. (*Rksamhitā*, X.129, 1-3). The translators and interpreters of this Vedic hymn continue with the following translation of the key formulation from the fourth stanza: 'from thought there evolved desire'. (ibid). Here, we will agree with the majority of interpreters and translate the Sanskrit genitive absolute phrase 'kāmas tad agre sam avartatādhi/manaso retah prathamam yad āsīt' « with » 'Then, in the beginning, Love first evolved/which was the primal seed of thought'.

<sup>49</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, transl. Alan C. M. Ross (Boston: Beacon Press, Bachelard, 1968), 7.

spaces it must become a place for our communal cohabitation within the atmospheres of a future breathful and mindful democracy. The call for a new community therefore needs to be restructured towards becoming a democracy being both engendered and mediated through prayer, mindfulness, breath and silence—the gestures and elements of democracy that are too often neglected or even entirely forgotten in political philosophy. This democracy will be like an inner horizontal calm being gathered and cultivated in us by fire, and it will enable the living beings of the earth to breathe and share the air of a new elemental-spiritual conspiracy within a new intersubjective, but also global communal correspondence of beings under the horizon of love. This is what represents the idea of *quiet democracy* as mindful and peaceful future place to respite and to breathe, and to enkindle mutual love.

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