Helping Yourself to Heidegger

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Agamben, Giorgio. *The Coming Community*. Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 (pp 108). ISBN 0816622353.

Esposito, Roberto. *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*. Trans. Timothy Campbell. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010 (pp 175). ISBN 0804746478.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Being Singular Plural*. Trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000 (pp 207). ISBN 0804739757.

Community theory has taken a decisively Heideggerian turn in recent times. Out of the ashes of human subjectivity, both separate and collective, hermeneutical phenomenology rises majestically with the promise of better things to come. In the European tradition, at least, the reign of the individual has run its course, while the vacuum left after the demise of communism seems unlikely to be filled with a viable alternative form of sociality for some time to come. A pre-War philosopher of the meaning of Being, which he himself called "the most universal and the emptiest of questions" (Heidegger 63), Heidegger is not the obvious candidate to fill the gap. The existential analytic of *Dasein* is neither political nor ethical (nor, for that matter, anthropological, sociological or psychological) but something purely ontological rather nebulously presupposed by all these disciplines. What is at stake, however, is the radical re-postulation of what subjectivity itself might entail if the ground is cleared of the metaphysics of the Cartesian *cogito sum*, one of the implications of which is that Being can no longer be conceived in isolation, but must be understood in advance as a mode of "Being-with" others (*Mitsein*). Although the deconstruction of the metaphysics of the autonomous subject has been

implicit in radical philosophy for at least a century now, its uses for political theory have remained elusive. Heidegger's attention to *Mitsein* as an ontological structure of *Dasein* was limited to a short chapter in *Being and Time*, and his own late Nazism was hardly an encouragement to any would-be followers. Until recently, that is, when a different political climate has favored a return to his work with an eye to its radical potential for theories of community in a post-individualistic age.

Community, in this new sense, is not to be understood in some idealized form as a collective bonding or property collectively owned. In the tradition followed by the authors reviewed here, community is better understood negatively—as a "common non-belonging" (Esposito 7) or exposure to loss dependent upon the "expropriation" of individual essence. To this extent, it differs from Marxism, which posits an essence of human nature in community based on production, as well as from the American model of neo-communitarianism. What needs to be recognized, these authors argue, is the impossibility of communion or immanence in a post-metaphysical world, indeed the end of the metaphysics of subjectivity altogether, with our exposure to alterity as the cornerstone of Being. This approach to alterity does not mean the recognition of self in the other, which is after all part of the humanist tradition. Rather, it entails the very experience of *the alterity of the other*, a kind of infinite displacement recalling Lacan's critique of American ego psychology for the way it refuses the lack (self-division) in the subject. Like Lacan, these authors follow Heidegger in deploring "the lack of the lack," which results in a "nihilism" in human relationships of the sort that led Europe to the totalitarian disasters of the last century. To put it in the terms used by Blanchot, whose *La commaunauté inavouable* (1983; *The Unavowable Community*, 1988) foreshadowed much of what was to come, we relate to each other through our common alterity and finitude, ultimately our shared exposure to death. If the phantom of the lost community, community as retrospective nostalgia, has haunted Western culture since at least Homer's *Odyssey*, the time has come to recognize loss as constitutive of community itself, with exposure to our common finitude offering the opportunity to encounter the other outside the servitude of selfhood.

The work of Agamben, Nancy, Esposito and others has brought with it a bracing new vocabulary with a tendency, like Heidegger's, to invest everyday or even banal terms with ontological significance. Giorgio Agamben's favourite term is "whatever" (*qualunque*), which carries with it some of the shrug-of-the-shoulders indifference to (traditional notions of) significance along with a great deal more. "Whatever" in the new sense means what is neither individual nor generic, neither particular nor general, that which exposes

and liberates us from the "false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal" (Agamben, *Coming Community* 1). Being is exposed in all its singularity, "as such," "*sic*," reclaimed from having this or that property identifying it as belonging to this or that set (being black, being French, being Muslim). The antinomy of the individual and the universal which underlies Western philosophy, Agamben explains, has its origin in language. The word "tree," for example, transforms singularities into members of a class or set (the tree) that may at times take the form of singularity (a tree, this particular tree). Returning to medieval philosophy (Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus), Agamben demonstrates how the human word is neither common (language) nor the communication of what is "proper" (one's own) — just as the human face is neither the individuation of a generic *facies* nor the universalization of singular traits. Rather, it is "whatever face," in which what belongs to common nature and what is proper are absolutely indifferent or indistinguishable. The notion of the individual's unsubstitutability, he argues, is a "hypocritical fiction" (24). "Manner" is another newly-invested term brought into service in Agamben's attempt to break up the binary of genus and species. "Maneries," again an inheritance from the medieval "dispute of the universals," expresses the idea of the "manner of things" (being in this or that mode)—"being in its rising forth," neither an essence nor an existence, but a Heideggerian "being that is *its* mode of being," both singular and multiple, valid for all (28). What Agamben is striving for is a formulation of what he calls exemplary or multiple singularity: "The example is only the being of that of which it is the example; but this being does not belong to it, it is perfectly common" (29). The multiple common place, the community as we must come to understand it, therefore, is nothing but the coming to itself of each of the singularities that constitute it.

Readers of Agamben's most well-known work, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (first published in Italian in 1995, five years after *The Coming Community*), will recognize many of these points: the Foucauldian critique of modern Western techniques of subjective individualization, the analysis of the way the political has been transformed into the biopolitical, opening the way for totalitarianism, the growing dissociation of birth (bare life, *zoe*) from the nation-state. In a later book, *L'aperto: L'uomo e l'animale* (*The Open: Man and Animal*) (2002), he has formulated the question in terms of the recent debate about the man-animal relation.[1] Since World War I, he

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1. See, for example, Jacques Derrida's *L'animal qui donc je suis* (2006; *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, 2008).

argues here, and particularly now, with the society of the spectacle, when it has become obvious that European nation-states are no longer capable of taking on historical tasks, all we have is the "very factical existence of peoples" (Agamben, *The Open* 76), bare life in the form of our animality. With the demise of the "anthropological machine," "the total humanization of the animal coincides with a total animalization of man" (77).

Heideggerian ontology and the barest form of bare life are welded together at the end of Agamben's *Coming Community* when he asks:

> What could be the politics of whatever singularity, that is, of a being whose community is mediated not by any condition of belonging (being red, being Italian, being Communist) nor by the simple absence of conditions (a negative community, such as that recently proposed in France by Maurice Blanchot), but by belonging itself? (85)

To exist is to co-belong with others, purely and simply, without representable identity. The State must be dissociated from any idea of a social bond (and here Agamben shares Alain Badiou's definition of the State as an un-binding). Humanity, in the form of the planetary petty bourgeoisie, can either be seen as moving towards its own destruction, or as being offered a new opportunity, unheard of before in history:

> If instead of continuing to search for a proper identity in the already improper and senseless form of individuality, humans were to succeed . . . in making of the proper being-thus not an identity and an individual property but a singularity without identity, a common and absolutely exposed singularity—if humans could, that is, not be-thus in this or that particular biography, but be only the thus, their singular exteriority and their face, then they would for the first time enter into a community without presuppositions and without subjects, into a communication without the incommunicable.
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> Selecting in the new planetary humanity those characteristics that allow for its survival, removing the thin diaphragm that separates bad mediatized advertising from the perfect exteriority that communicates only itself—that is the political task of our generation. (65)

Jean-Luc Nancy has been at the forefront of this attempt to re-define community over the past three decades, with a list of books whose titles tell the story: *Le partage des voix* (1982; "Sharing Voices," 1989), *La commaunauté désoeuvrée* (1986; *The Inoperative Community*, 1991), (co-edited) *Who Comes After the Subject?* (1991), *Être singulier pluriel* (1996; *Being Singular*

Plural, 2000), and many others. Combining Althusser on interpellation, Lacan on lack and Derridean deconstruction, Nancy's work ponders the way a community without subjects is one where the plural liberates (or shares) the singular and *vice versa*. Like Agamben, he thinks through Heidegger's *Mitsein* in relation to the human face. The obvious but not always recognized point about the face, he argues, is what it's there for: to face not ourselves but others. This "archi-original impossibility of Narcissus," however, is what opens straight onto "the possibility of the political" (Nancy, *Inoperative Community* xxxviii).

A new politics necessarily challenges the multi-culturalism of post-modernity for its valorization of the immanence or essence of different faces, voices, gestures and attitudes. *Being Singular Plural,* written in 1995, begins with a long list of places in the world disfigured by bloody conflicts among different identities, the numbers of refugees rising all the time, and asks whether "we" means anything any longer. Something very different from "this autistic multiplicity" is needed if we are to break up this violent relatedness, as "we have not even begun to discover what it is to be many" (*Being Singular Plural* xiii-xiv).

Again, part of the difficulty stems from language, which is always an address simultaneously to both "me" and "us" (the world, history, people, things). The address is singular, but the other that demands our response (communication) is plural (community). We might demur that the logic of this "with," saying "being-with-one another," often requires heavy-handed syntax, and Nancy would agree (xvi). On the other hand, it gives language the special responsibility of defining community in its present-day form, one that for him involves *interrupting* the sort of totalizing myths of community on which Nazism was founded. Following Bataille and Blanchot, Nancy attempts to re-theorize the significance of myth for a post-fascist age. The essay "Eulogy for the Mêlée" in *Being Singular Plural* ends with a distinction which makes clear what he has in mind. Western culture has traditionally valorized myth (the Homeric "mythos"), which "is the infinite presupposition of its own identity and authenticity" (158). On the contrary writing (literature), or rather "legend," from *legendum est* ("this is to be read"), is that which offers itself to each singularity who reads it (assuming we inhabit a readers' world). The totality that would fulfill community requires constant interruption. If, in mythic mode, I say "Aphrodite" or "France," this inscription of a proper name is a promise of presence or identity in advance. But "France" can only be inscribed through what is shared, in an infinite multiplicity of ways, by each French man or woman in their particularity. This inscription, what Nancy has also

rather clumsily called "literary communism," implicates writing directly with the political; as the site of our being-in-common, writing has the task of communicating an infinite resource of common and singular meanings—not some appeal to an impossible mythic Logos of shared community but rather the inscription of this very impossibility.

On the basis of his view of writing as the sharing of voices, Nancy has helped himself liberally, as it may have been noticed, to the voice of Derrida. (The same could be said of all these writers' use of Heidegger. Although only a shadow in their main texts, he appears repeatedly in the notes, in one of which, for example, Nancy confesses that he feels called upon to re-write *Being and Time* in order to correct the German phenomenologist's failure to highlight and centralize the concept of *Mitsein* [*Being Singular Plural* 204n81].)[2] Derrida represents a daunting presence for any post-Heideggerian theorist of community of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. He himself, however, saw it the other way round, with Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy as the providers. Quoting Bataille's notion of the "community of those without community" in *Politique de l'amitié* (1994; *The Politics of Friendship*, 1997), Derrida refers to these predecessors as "among those that count the most for me today," "thinkers and texts to which I am bound without ever being their equal" (Derrida 47n15). The un-binding of a literary community without community, it seems, may among other things help alleviate the anxiety of influence. These writers do indeed share a substantial body of thought: the deconstruction of logo-phonocentrism, the insistence on the necessity of the other at the heart of the *cogito*,[3] and the replacement of immanence with propinquity (not being-in-community but being-with-others). The emphasis, however, is always away from any hint of solidarity or fraternity, towards a phrase attributed to Aristotle which Derrida returns to repeatedly: "O my friends, there is no friend" (Derrida xvii).

The latest contribution to this Franco-Italian debate, Roberto Esposito's *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, which has just been

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2. "It is necessary to re-write *Being and Time*: this is not a ridiculous pretension, and it is not 'mine'; it is the necessity of all the major works, insofar as they are ours. One can guess without much trouble that this necessity also belongs to the stakes of a political rewriting" (Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* 204n81).

3. Derrida characteristically uses Cartesian terms to turn the *cogito* on its head: "I think, therefore I am the other; I think, therefore I need the other (in order to think); I think, therefore the possibility of friendship is lodged in the movement of my thought in so far as it demands, calls for, desires the other, the necessity of the other, the cause of the other at the heart of the *cogito*" (*Politics of Friendship* 224).

translated into English, expresses an "unpayable debt," in particular, to Nancy (Esposito 151n1). Debts and gifts are in fact at the heart of the matter for Esposito. The word "communitas," he argues, must be understood literally in terms of the Latin *munus-muneris* (gift)—from which we derive English words such as remuneration, munificence, municipal, etc. The specificity of *munus*, in contrast to the more general *donum*, lies in its obligatory character; once you have accepted the *munus*, an obligation has been created to exchange it in terms of goods or services, thus (potentially) releasing yourself from obligation. A present (*donum*) is unilateral, doesn't require an equal return, whereas "although produced by a benefit that was previously received, the *munus* indicates only the gift that one gives, not what one receives. All of the *munus* is projected onto the transitive act of giving" (Esposito 5). Community, therefore, is better understood as loss in the sense of the perpetual and obligatory act of giving others what you can't keep to yourself and of which you've never been the owner anyway:

> According to the originary valence of the concept of community, what the members of a community share, based upon the complex and profound meaning of munus, is rather an expropriation of their own essence, which isn't limited to their "having" but one that involves and affects their own "being subjects." . . . [this discourse takes us] from the more traditional terrain of anthropology to that more radical terrain of ontology; . . . the community isn't joined to an addition but to a subtraction of subjectivity, by which I mean that its members are no longer identical with themselves but are constitutively exposed to a propensity that forces them to open their own individual boundaries in order to appear as what is "outside" themselves. (138)

Renouncing subjectivity (our "most proper property"), exposing ourselves to the risk of losing protective individual borders, makes us all "givers to" in as much as we are "given by" in a circuit of mutual gift exchange (5-7).

Central to Esposito's project is the insertion of *munus* back into "the municipal" as well as the deconstruction of the distinction between private and public which lies at the heart of modernity. To this end his book offers a systematic and illuminating summary of the theories from Hobbes to Bataille which have laid the foundations for the idea of "im-munization" (defined as the emptying out of the "com-mune" as reciprocity and mutuality). Hobbes rejected Aristotle's view of the natural sociality of man and like Freud assumed a primary aggressivity which precludes any community other than one

based on fear. What humans have in common, he said, is their capacity to be killed. Knowing this, we hand over our rights to a third party, the sovereign, in a gesture of unconditional obedience; the political is marked by an originary guilt that can be atoned for only by introjecting that guilt in renunciation and sacrifice. For Rousseau, however, Hobbes's man as all-devouring wolf is a product of civilization. His own research into the essence of human nature led him to the paradigm of the self-sufficient individual. "I am whole, complete where I am," he writes in 1767; "*in* me, *with* me, *for* me" (Esposito 57-58), a philosophy that underlies romantic theories right up to contemporary American communitarianism (e.g. Charles Taylor's *Sources of Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* [1989] or *Multiculturalism and the "Politics of Recognition"* [1992]). This view, argues Esposito, is posited on the doomed attempt to isolate the man of nature from his social-cultural context (the hand, after all, is already a tool). Rousseau's emphasis on the originarity of solitude, therefore, must ultimately be regarded as a reaction against the absence of community. Or, put in Derridian terms, according to the logic of the supplement the attempt to define positively the origin ("natural man") contains within it its own denaturalization. Notwithstanding the contradiction that subtracts community from itself, Esposito concludes, "Rousseau's work constitutes the first demand of the community [*munus*] as our own truth" (49).

In the three remaining chapters (on Kant, Heidegger and Bataille) Esposito continues to trace the progress in radical modernity of the desubjectification of the ego, the view that what humans really share is the impossibility of community (as inter-subjectivity or organic whole). Kant never saw community in Hegelian-Marxian terms as a reappropriation by humans of their own essence; essence for him is always a debt or lack, by which history is preceded. In being subjected to the law, the subject is subtracted from self-consistency. Hannah Arendt, with whom Esposito is often in dialogue in this book, adapted the Kantian community of the law to fit the post-War climate, emphasizing the reciprocal difference by which community is crossed and constituted (what Kant called "respect" as opposed to "love"). As Arendt writes in *The Human Condition* (1958): "To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time" (qtd. in Esposito 79). It is a haunting image, one of community whittled down to the minimum in response to the extravagances of totalitarian fullness and fusion ("fatherland," "brotherhood") but at the same time one which might start humanity off again in a less self-destructive direction.

To Habermas's hypothesis of the community of communication in a globally networked world Esposito opposes a Bataillean hermeneutic of being-towards-death which places us always at the limit. Communication, Bataille wrote in *On Nietzsche* (1945), "cannot proceed from one full and intact individual to another. It requires individuals whose separate existence in themselves is *risked*, placed at the limit of death and nothingness" (qtd. in Esposito 145-46). In the loneliness of our common emptiness, in sharing the experience of what can't be experienced (death), we escape the greater danger, the "nihilism" of being sealed off in ourselves. Whether in the "openness" of our common animality (Bataille, Derrida, Agamben) or simply the avoidance of the crises of the paradigm of the state or the spread of multi-cultural conflicts, the question remains: what is to-come after the big political experiments of the twentieth century, and at a time of profound change in culture or civilization productive of what some see as new forms of humanity itself?

Another way of putting all this is in terms of the debates around the concept of democracy to which these writers have also been contributing recently.[4] In a book entitled *Démocratie dans quel état?* (2009), which includes presentations by both Nancy and Agamben (along with Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, Slavoj Žižek and others), Plato is invoked in the exploration of the inherent contradictions in the term, as well as its radical potential. For Badiou, the "interminable twilight" of democracy today, in the form of parliamentary capitalism, continues to call up its original Platonic sense of the existence of the people conceived as power over themselves—by which is meant not a homogeneous "life of the people," but rather the "communism*s*" which are today being gradually invented (Agamben et. al. 25). For Žižek, never far away when a big debate is at hand, the fetish of democracy in the West today, whereby sheltering behind the ballot box becomes a means of avoiding protest against injustice, leads inevitably to a "utilitarian, pragmatic inertia" (Agamben et. al. 146). The critique of the democratic form, he agrees with Badiou, is the truly risky philosophical imperative today, the one that poses problems altogether more difficult than acknowledging the extent of the injustices of global capitalism (Badiou and Žižek 90). For Žižek the question is not so much whether a state is democratic or not, but rather the form of power wielded by its sovereign. After all, it was as a result of more or less free elections that Hitler came to power. The external figure of the sovereign is integral

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4. Some of them, like Jacques Rancière, begin from the assumption behind Churchill's famous quip that democracy is the worst form of government, apart from all the others that have been tried (Agamben et. al. 96).

to any political structure—just as the analyst is integral to the analytic relation (there is no such thing as self-analysis). So in speaking of power, it's less a question of knowing whether it is democratically legitimate or not than one of understanding the character of the "totalitarian excess" associated with the leader (Agamben et. al. 146).

The common celebration of democracy as that which fosters individual liberty may well be heading towards extinction. Whether singular plurality proves to be a more just and effective foundation for community remains to be seen. Indeed, the material conditions for such a politics remain vague—although here, it could be added, these authors are in good company, as Plato's ideal of the philosophical city has frequently been called utopian. If the collective destiny of human beings is today best defined negatively, or remains largely to be invented, this soft revolution is nonetheless generating enough collective energy to do a great deal more than simply raise Heidegger from the ashes.

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