

COMMUNITY AND NIHILISM

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ABSTRACT: Developing the arguments put forward in books such as *Communitas*, in this article the political philosopher Roberto Esposito tries to overcome the customary opposition between the notions of community and nihilism. His aim is to rethink what community might mean in an age of ‘completed nihilism’. In a subtle genealogical and etymological analysis of the concept of community, he demonstrates how, rather than establishing a substantial and positive bond, community is constituted by nothingness, by a shared lack—which communal, communitarian and totalitarian politics seek to deny. The excavation of the meaning of *communitas* allows Esposito to critically examine the manner in which the thinking of community has been expunged by modern political philosophy.

KEYWORDS: Bataille; Community; Heidegger; Hobbes; Nancy; Nihilism; Nothing; Rousseau; Totalitarianism

1. What is the relationship between the terms ‘community’ and ‘nihilism’? The answer that comes from the various philosophies of community—but also from a widespread interpretation of nihilism—goes in the direction of a radical opposition. Nihilism and community are not just in a relation of alterity, but in one of open contrast, which does not admit points of contact or areas of overlap. They reciprocally exclude each other: where one is present—or, when one is present—the other is absent, and vice versa. Whether the opposition is located on the synchronic level or along a diachronic trajectory, what matters is the clarity of the alternative between two poles that seem to acquire a meaning precisely from their irreducibility. Nihilism—in its most distinguishing connotations of artificiality, anomie, and senselessness—is perceived as that which has made community impossible, or even unthinkable. On the other hand, community has always interpreted itself as what resists, restrains, and contrasts the nihilistic drift. This is basically the role assigned to community by the communal [*comunialità*], communitarian, and communicative conceptions which, for more than a century, have regarded it as the only barrier against the devastating power of nothingness which pervades modern society. What changes, with regard to this scenario, is the order of succession that is attributed at each turn to community and modern society, not their rigidly dichotomous character.

If Ferdinand Tönnies put community before society—according to a genealogy which was then appropriated by all the philosophies of decline, betrayal, and loss originating both from the Right and the Left at the turn of the twentieth century—contemporary neo-communitarians across the Atlantic reverse the stages of the dichotomy, yet without questioning its basic structure. It is community—or better, the particular communities into which the Tönniesian archetype has been fragmented—that follows modern society in a phase marked by the crisis of the state paradigm and the proliferation of multicultural conflict. In this case, community is no longer understood as a residual phenomenon with regard to the sociocultural forms assumed by modernity, but rather as an objection to the insufficiency of the latter's individualistic-universalistic model: it is the very society of individuals, the destroyer of the ancient organic community, that now generates new communitarian forms as a posthumous reaction to its own inner entropy. Even from this perspective, what re-emerges is the reciprocal exclusion of community and nihilism: community advances or withdraws, expands or contracts itself, on the basis of the space which has not yet been 'colonized' by nihilism. When Habermas opposes a communicative to a strategic rationality, he remains within the same interpretative paradigm, with an additional, defensive emphasis: the 'unlimited community of communication' constitutes, at the same time, the point of resistance and the reserve of meaning in face of the increasing intrusiveness of technology. The fact that community is understood as a transcendental a priori—rather than a factual one, like in the more rudimentary approach of the neo-communitarians—does not change its basic hermeneutic frame. Even in this case, community, considered as a possibility if not a reality, is understood as the borderline and the wall that contains the advance of nihilism. It is seen as something full—a substance, a promise, a value—that does not let itself be emptied out by the vortex of nothingness. It is another configuration of the battle between the 'thing' and the 'nothing' that functions as a presupposition for the entire tradition we are examining: against the explosion—or the implosion—of the nothing, community holds back the reality of the thing; or rather, it is the very thing that opposes its own annihilation.

2. But is this an acceptable presupposition? Is it not itself precisely what hinders any thought of a community that would be worthy of our age—which is indeed the age of completed nihilism? If we assumed this presupposition as such, we would necessarily be obliged to choose between two hypotheses which are equally unacceptable. That is, we would find ourselves either negating the structurally nihilistic attitude of the present age, or excluding the question of community from our horizon of relevance. In order to speak about community in terms that are not simply nostalgic, we would be left with the possibility of circumscribing nihilism to an aspect, a particular moment, of our experience. We could consider it as a 'fixed term' phenomenon, bound to dissolve itself or at least regress at a certain point. Or we could even understand it like a disease which has attacked only some organs of an otherwise healthy body. Yet this kind of reductive argument goes against all evidence, which shows that nihilism is not an interlude or a specific

situation, but rather the basic tendency of modern society, which has today achieved its utmost expression. But what does this mean? The only way to get our head around the question without renouncing any of its terms requires bringing together community and nihilism in a single argument. Even more, we should not see the completion of nihilism as an insurmountable obstacle, but as an opportunity to elaborate a new thinking of community. Obviously, this does not mean that community and nihilism turn out to be identical, or even just symmetrical; that they are to be located on the same level or along the same trajectory. Rather, it means that they intersect at a point that the two cannot disregard because, in different ways, it is constitutive of them both. This point—which is unperceived, repressed, and neutralized by current communitarian philosophies—can be regarded as the ‘nothing’. It is this that community and nihilism have in common in a way that has so far remained mostly unexplored.

But in what sense? We leave aside for the time being the (far from simple) question about the relation between the nothing and nihilism—yet we shall return to it in a short time. Let us focus on community. We have seen how it has traditionally been opposed to nihilism as if it were the thing itself; and even how its definition is one with such an opposition: community would not just be different from the nothing and irreducible to it, but it would also coincide with its explicit opposite—a ‘whole’ entirely filled by itself. Now, I believe that this is precisely the standpoint that should not only be problematized, but even reversed: community is not the place of the opposition of the thing and the nothing, but that of their superimposition. I have attempted to account for this claim by means of an analysis, both etymological and philosophical, of the term *communitas*, starting from the term *munus*, from which it derives.¹ The conclusive result of this investigation is community’s categorical distance from any idea of property collectively owned by a group of individuals—or even from their belonging to a common identity. According to the original value of this concept, what the members of *communitas* share—this is precisely the complex, but pregnant meaning of *munus*—is rather the expropriation of their substance which is not limited to their ‘having’, but involves and draws on their very ‘being subjects’. Here, my argument unfolds in a way that shifts it from the more traditional field of anthropology, or of political philosophy, to the (more radical) field of ontology: the fact that community is not linked to a surplus, but a deficit, of subjectivity, means that its members are no longer identical to themselves, but structurally exposed to a tendency that leads them to break their individual limits and face up to their ‘outside’. From this point of view—which breaks any continuity between what is ‘common’ and what is ‘one’s own’ [*proprio*], linking it rather to what is not one’s own [*improprio*—the figure of the other returns to centre stage. If the subject of the community is no longer the ‘same’, he will necessarily be ‘other’. He will not be another subject, but a sequence of alterations that never coalesce into a new identity.

3. But if community is always the community of others and never of oneself, this means that its presence is structurally inhabited by an absence—of subjectivity, identity, and

1. See Roberto Esposito, *Communitas. Origine e destino della comunità*, Turin, Einaudi, 1998.

property. It means that it is not a ‘thing’—or, it is a thing defined precisely by its ‘not’. A ‘non-thing’. Now, how should we understand such ‘not’? And how does it relate to the thing it inheres to? What is for certain is that it does not relate to it in the sense of a pure negation. The nothing-in-common is not the opposite of an entity, but rather something that corresponds and co-belongs to it in a very intense way. Yet we should not misunderstand the very meaning of this correspondence, or co-belonging. The nothing of *communitas* should not be interpreted as what *communitas* is not yet able to be; as the negative moment of a contradiction bound to be solved dialectically in the identity of opposites. But neither should it be interpreted as the hiding place in which the thing withdraws since it cannot unveil itself in the fullness of a pure presence. As a matter of fact, in both cases, the nothing of *communitas* would not continue to be the nothing of the thing, but it would be transformed into something different which the thing would relate to in the modes of teleology or presupposition. It would be the thing’s past or its future, not its bare present—that which it is and is not other from it. In short, the nothing is not the precondition or the outcome of the community—the presupposition that frees it for its ‘real’ possibility—but rather its only way of being. In other words, community is not proscribed, obscured, or veiled by the nothing; it is constituted by it. This simply means that community is not an entity, nor a collective subject, nor a group of subjects. It is the relation that makes them no longer be individual subjects, since it interrupts their identity with a bar that passes through them and thus changes them. It is the ‘with’, the ‘between’, the threshold on which they cross in a contact that relates them to others to the very extent that it separates them from themselves.

We could say that community is not the *inter* of the *esse*, but the *esse* as *inter*; not a relationship that shapes being, but being itself as a relationship. This is an important distinction since it gives us back in the clearest possible way the superimposition of being with the nothing: the being of community is the gap, the spacing that relates us to others in a common non-belonging, a loss of what is one’s own which never manages to be added up into a common good. Only lack is common, not possession, property and appropriation. The fact that the term *munus* is understood by the Latins only as the gift given, and never as the gift received—which is instead rendered by the word *donum*—means that it is a principle that lacks ‘remuneration’. It means that the leak of subjective substance which it determines stays there—it cannot be filled in, cured, or cicatrized; that its opening cannot be closed by any filling in [*risarcitura*], or compensation [*risarcimento*], if it is to remain really condivided [*condivisa*], or shared. In the concept of ‘condivision’ the ‘con’, or ‘with’, is indeed associated with ‘division’. The limit it alludes to is that which unites, not in the mode of convergence, conversion, or confusion, but rather in that of divergence, diversion, and diffusion. The direction here is always from the inside to the outside, and never from the outside to the inside. Community is the exteriorisation of the inside. For this—given that it is opposed to the idea of internalisation, not to mention that of internment—the *inter* of community can only link exteriorities or ‘leakages’, subjects who face up to their outside. This movement of decentralisation can be recognized in the very idea of ‘partition’—which refers to

both ‘condivision’ and ‘departure’: community is never a place of arrival, but one of departure. It is even the very departure towards what does not and will never belong to us. Therefore *communitas* is far from producing effects of commonness [*comunanza*], association [*accommunamento*], or communion. It does not warm us up, or protect us. On the contrary, it exposes the subject to the most radical risk: the risk of losing together with his individuality also the boundaries that guarantee the fact that he is intangible for the other. The risk of suddenly slipping into the nothing of the thing.

4. It is with reference to this nothing that we must address the question of nihilism—in a way that is not only able to grasp the connection, but also the distinction of levels on which it is based. What I mean to say is that nihilism is not the expression, but the suppression of the nothing-in-common. Certainly, nihilism has to do with the nothing, but precisely in the guise of its annihilation. Nihilism is not the nothing of the thing, but that of the thing’s nothing. It is a nothing squared: the nothing multiplied and simultaneously swallowed up by the nothing. This means that we should identify at least two meanings, or levels, of the nothing, which must be kept separate in spite of and within their apparent coincidence. While the first level is, as we have seen, that of a relationship—the gap, or the spacing, that makes the being-in-common a relation, not an entity—the second is, on the other hand, that of its dissolution: the dissolution of the relationship in the absoluteness of the without-relation.

If we look at Hobbes’s absolutism from this perspective, the stages of such a ‘solution’ assume an extraordinary clarity. The fact that Hobbes inaugurates modern political nihilism should not simply be understood in the sense that he ‘discovers’ the nothingness of substance of a world freed from the metaphysical constraint of any transcendent *veritas*; Hobbes rather ‘covers’ this nothingness of substance again with another, more powerful, nothingness, which has precisely the function of annihilating the potentially dissolutive effects of the first. Similarly, the *pointe* of his political philosophy lies in the invention of a new origin aimed at damming up—and turning into an ordering compulsion—the original nothing, the absence of origin, of *communitas*. Obviously, such a contradictory strategy of neutralisation—emptying the natural void by means of an artificial void created *ex nihilo*—is derived from an altogether negative, and even catastrophic, interpretation of the principle of condivision, the initial sharing of being. It is precisely the inevitable negativity attributed to the original community that justifies a sovereign order—the Leviathan State—able to pre-emptively immunize itself from its intolerable *munus*. In order for this operation to be successful—that is, to be logically rational in spite of its very high cost in terms of sacrifice and renunciation—it is not only necessary that such common *munus* be deprived of its character as donative excess in favour of its character as defect, but also that this defect as lack—in the neutral sense of the Latin *delinquere*—be understood in terms of a real ‘delict’ [*delitto*], a crime, or even a unstoppable chain of potential crimes.

It is this radically forced interpretation—which turns the nothing-in-common into the community of crime—that determines the obliteration of *communitas* in favour of a

political form founded upon the emptying of any relation that is external to the vertical relation between individuals and the sovereign, and consequently upon dissociation itself. Having started off from the need to protect the thing from the nothing that appears to threaten it, Hobbes thus ends up annihilating not only the nothing, but the thing itself; he sacrifices to the interest of the individual not only the *inter* of the *esse*, but also the *esse* of the *inter*. All the modern answers that have been given to the ‘Hobbesian problem of order’ in the course of centuries—in decisionist, functionalist, and systemic guises—run the risk of remaining caught in this vicious circle: the only possible way to contain the dangers that are inherent to the original lack [*carezza*] of man as animal seems to be the construction of an artificial prosthesis—the barrier of institutions—able to protect him from the potentially destructive contact with his fellow men. Yet, assuming a prosthesis, that is, a non-organ, a lacking organ, as a form of social mediation means facing the void with a void that is even more radical, since, from the beginning, it is seized and produced by the absence that it should compensate for. The very principle of representation, understood as the formal device aimed at giving presence to someone who is absent, only reproduces and strengthens that void insofar as it is not able to conceptualize its primordial character, which is not derived from anything. In other words, the principle of representation is not able to grasp that the nothing that it should compensate for is not a loss of substance, foundation, or value, which suddenly dissolved a previous order, but the very character of our being-in-common. Not wanting or knowing how to dig deeper into the nothing of the relation, modern nihilism finds itself being handed over to the nothing of the absolute, the absolute nothing.

5. The modern philosophy of community attempts to elude the absolute nothing through an option that is both similar and opposite to the one I have just described; however, it ends up falling back into the very nihilism it would like to fight against. In this case, it is the thing that is made absolute, rather than the nothing. But what does making the thing absolute mean, if not annihilating—and hence once again strengthening—the nothing itself? This strategy no longer empties, but, on the contrary, fills in the void which is determined, and even constituted, by the primordial *munus*. Beginning with Rousseau and up to contemporary communitarianism, what appears as an alternative option turns out to be the specular reverse of Hobbesian immunisation, with which it shares both the subjectivist lexicon and the particularistic outcome—this time applied to a collectivity as a whole, not the individual. What is missing in both cases—crushed by the overlapping of the individual with the collective—is relation itself, understood as a modality at the same time singular and plural of existence. In the first case, relation is annihilated by the absoluteness that separates individuals; in the second, by their fusion in a single subject closed within his self-identity. If we take the Rousseauian community of Clarens as a model of such an—infinately reproduced—self-identification, we can detect in it *in vitro* all of its defining characters: from the reciprocal incorporation of its members to the perfect self-sufficiency of the whole they give rise to, to the inevitable opposition that results from it with regard to its outside. The outside as such is incom-

patible with a community that is so folded towards its inside that it institutes among its members a transparency without opacity, an immediateness without mediations, which constantly reduces each member to another who is no longer such since he is pre-emptively identified with the first. The fact that Rousseau does not prefigure—and actually constantly denies—the possibility of translating such *communauté de coeur* into some form of political democracy does not eliminate the power of mythological suggestion that it has exercised not only on the entire Romantic tradition, but also, in different ways, on the ideal type of the organic *Gemeinschaft*—itself founded on the generality of an essential will which has precedence over that of its individual members.

But there is something else that pertains more specifically to this unwittingly nihilistic relapse of the opposition of community to the nihilism of modern society—to which community not only shows itself to be fully adherent, but also strictly functional as its mere reverse. Each time that the lack of sense of the individualistic paradigm has been opposed to the surplus of sense of a community filled by its own collective essence, the consequences have been destructive: first for the internal, or external, enemies against whom the community was established, and eventually for the community itself. This obviously applies in the first place to the totalitarian experiments which have stained with blood the first half of the last century, but also, in a different and less devastating way, to all forms of ‘fatherland’, ‘motherland’, or ‘brotherland’ [*fratria*] which have gathered crowds of followers, patriots, and brothers around a model inevitably centred on a *koine*. The reason of this tragic compulsion to repeat—which does not seem to be on the wane—lies in the fact that when the thing fills itself to the brim with its own substance, it runs the risk of exploding or imploding under its own weight. This happens as soon as the subjects gathered in the communal [*comuniale*] bond identify the access to their condition of possibility in the re-appropriation of their own common essence. The latter, in turn, appears to shape itself as the fullness of a lost origin, which would be for this reason retrievable in the internalisation of a temporarily exteriorized existence. In this way, it is assumed that it is possible, and even necessary, to elide—or fill in—the void of essence that constitutes the *ex of exsistentia*—its not being its own since it is ‘common’. It is only in this way—by means of the abolition of its nothing—that the thing can finally be realized. Yet, the (necessarily phantasmatic) realisation of the thing is, as a matter of fact, the aim of totalitarianism; the absolute lack of differentiation that ends up suppressing not only its own object, but the very subject that puts it into effect. The thing can only be appropriated in its destruction. It cannot be retrieved for the simple reason that it was never lost: what appears to be lost is only the nothing that constitutes it in its common dimension.

6. The first thinker who looked for the community in the nothing of the thing was Heidegger. Although it is impossible to retrace here the complex trajectory of the interrogation about the thing that unfolded throughout his work, it is necessary to focus on the 1950 paper titled ‘The Thing’ (*Das Ding*). Such trajectory seems to culminate in this paper; even more crucially, the ‘thing’—which is elsewhere addressed in its aesthetic,

logical, or historical aspects—is here brought back to its common essence. This expression needs to be understood in a twofold way. First, in the sense that Heidegger summons up the most modest, ordinary, and down-to-earth things—in this text, the jug. But also in the sense that this modesty looks after the empty point in which the thing recovers its least expected meaning, as Heidegger had already argued in *The Origin of the Work of Art*: ‘The unpretentious thing evades thought most stubbornly. Or can it be that this self-refusal of the mere thing [...] belongs precisely to the essence of the thing?’² The lecture on ‘The Thing’ is devoted precisely to the definition of this essence—‘the thingness of the thing’. This does not amount to the objectivity in which we represent the thing; or to the production from which the (produced) thing seems to ‘originate’. And so? It is precisely here that the example of the jug is helpful—but also that of the other ‘things’ Heidegger refers to in the essays of those years, such as the tree, the bridge, and the threshold. What characteristic element links them all? Basically, it is the void. The void is the essence of these things, as well as of all things in general. This is the case with the jug—which is literally gathered together around a void and is, in the last instance, formed by it: ‘When we fill the jug, the pouring that fills it flows into the empty jug. The emptiness, the void, is what does the vessel’s holding. The empty space, this nothing of the jug [*Die Leere, dieses Nichts am Krug*], is what the jug is as the holding vessel.’³ The essence of the thing is therefore its nothingness, to the extent that outside of the perspective this opens, the thing loses its most intimate nature, to the point of disappearing—or, like Heidegger has it, to the point of being annihilated. As soon as we forget about its essence ‘in truth, the thing as thing remains proscribed, nil, and in that sense annihilated [*In Wahrheit bleibt jedoch das Ding als Ding verwehrt, nichtig und in solchem Sinne vernichtet*].’⁴

All this may seem to be paradoxical: the thing is annihilated if we do not grasp fully its essential character. Yet, as we have just seen, this essential character lies in nothing else than its void. It is the forgetting of this nothingness—this void—that hands the thing over to a scientific [*scientista*], productivist, and nihilistic point of view which nullifies it. Even in this case, we find ourselves obliged to establish a distinction between two kinds of ‘nothingness’: the first gives us back the thing in its deep reality, while the second removes it from us. Or better still, nullifying the first nothingness, the second nullifies the thing itself that is constituted by it. Some lines later, Heidegger gives us the key to this apparent paradox: the nothingness that saves the thing from nothingness—to the extent that it essentially constitutes it as thing—is the nothingness of the *munus*, the offer that reverses the inside into the outside: ‘To pour from the jug is to give [*schenken*].’⁵ Not only this, but this nothingness is the nothingness of the ‘common’ *munus* insofar as it gives itself in the gathering and as a gathering: ‘The nature of the holding void is gathered in

2. Martin Heidegger, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, in David Farrell Krell (ed.), *Basic Writings*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 161.

3. Martin Heidegger, ‘The Thing’, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, London, Harper Perennial, 1976, p. 169.

4. Heidegger, ‘The Thing’, pp. 170-1.

5. Heidegger, ‘The Thing’, p. 172.

the giving'.⁶ To this end, Heidegger recalls the old German words *thing* and *dinc* in their original meaning of 'reunion'. The giving expressed by the void of the jug is also and above all a gathering. What is it that gathers together the void of the thing by offering it? Heidegger adds at this point the motif of the 'fourfold', that is to say, the relation between the earth and the sky, mortals and divinities. But what we should focus on is the relation as such: the nothing that it puts in common is the community of the nothing as the essence of the thing. Is it not precisely this—the pure relation—that constitutes the common element of all the things mentioned above: the tree that links the earth to the sky, the bridge that connects two banks, the threshold that joins the inside with the outside? Just as is the case with *communitas*, is this not a unity in distance and of distance; of a distance that unites or a separation that brings near? And what is, in the end, nihilism if not an abolition of distance—of the nothingness of the thing—that makes any nearness impossible? 'The failure of nearness [*das Ausbleiben der Nähe*] to materialize in consequence of the abolition of all distances has brought the distanceless to dominance. In the default of nearness the thing remains annihilated as a thing in our sense.'⁷

7. The only author who tackled the question opened by Heidegger—that of the relation between community and the nothing in the time of completed nihilism—is Georges Bataille: "Communication' cannot proceed from one full and intact being to another. It requires beings whose being in themselves is *risked*, placed at the limit of death and nothingness [*néant*]."⁸ This passage refers back to a short text entitled 'Nothingness, Transcendence, Immanence' in which nothingness is defined as 'the limit of a being' beyond which this being 'no longer exists, no longer is. For us, that nonbeing is filled with meaning: I know I can be reduced to nothing [*Ce non-être est pour nous plein de sens: je sais qu'on peut m'anéantir*].'⁹ Why is the possibility of being annihilated filled with meaning—and even amounts to the only workable meaning at a time when every other meaning seems to be waning? This question leads us to both Bataille's interpretation of nihilism and the point at which it crosses aporetically the inhabitable place of community. For Bataille, nihilism is not a flight of sense—or from sense—but rather its closure within a homogeneous and completed conception of being. There aren't other instances in which nihilism is less reducible to what threatens to empty the thing. On the contrary, nihilism is what clogs the thing in a fullness without cracks or fissures. In short, nihilism should not be looked for on the side of the lack, but on that of the subtraction of lack. It is the lack of lack—its repression or filling in. It is what subtracts us from our otherness blocking us inside ourselves; what makes that 'us' into a series of completed individuals who are turned towards their inside, fully resolved in themselves:

Boredom then discloses the nothingness of self-enclosure [*le néant de l'être enfermé sur lui-même*]. When a separate being stops communicating, it withers. It wastes away, (obscurely) feeling that *by itself it doesn't exist*. Unproductive and unattractive,

6. Heidegger, 'The Thing', p. 172.

7. Heidegger, 'The Thing', p. 181.

8. Georges Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone, London, Athlone Press, 1992, p. 19 (my translation).

9. Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, p. 177.

such inner nothingness repels us. It brings about a fall into restless boredom, and boredom transfers the restlessness from inner nothingness to outer nothingness—or anguish.¹⁰

What emerges here clearly is the twofold level of the semantics of nothingness and, at the same time, the movement Bataille carries out from the first to the second level—from the nothingness of the individual, of what is one's own, the inside, to the nothing-in-common of the outside. This second nothing is also a nothing, but it is the nothing that tears us away from the absolute nothing—the nothing of the absolute—since it is the nothing of relation. Man is structurally exposed to—but we should also say: constituted by—the paradoxical condition of being able to avoid annihilation by implosion only running the risk of annihilating himself by explosion: 'With temptation, if I can put it in this way, being is crushed by the twin pincers of nothingness. By not communicating, it is annihilated into the emptiness of an isolated life. By communicating it likewise risks being destroyed.'¹¹

The fact that Bataille—here as elsewhere—speaks of 'being' alluding to our existence should not be interpreted only as a terminological imprecision due to the non-professional philosophical character of his thought, but as the intentional effect of an overlapping between anthropology and ontology within the common figure of lack, or, more precisely, the ripping [*déchirure*]. Indeed, it is true that we are able to face up to the being that lies outside our boundaries only if we break them—and even identify ourselves with such a rupture. But this is due to the fact that being is also primordially lacking with regard to itself, since the ground of things does not amount to a substance but a primordial opening. We access this ground—this gap—in the limit-experiences that take us away from ourselves, from the mastery of our existence. Yet these experiences are nothing else than the anthropological effect (or the subjective dimension) of the void of being that originates them: a big hole made by several holes that alternately open themselves inside it. In this sense, we could well say that man is the wound of a being that is in its turn always-already wounded. This means that when we speak of the being-in-common, the 'communal' [*comuniale*], as a continuum into which every existence that has broken its own individual boundaries falls back, we should not understand this continuum as a homogeneous whole—this is precisely the nihilistic perspective. Nor should we understand it as being in the strict sense of the word—or as what is Other from being. We should rather understand it as a vortex—the common *munus*—in which the continuum is one with what is discontinuous, and being is one with not-being. This is the reason why the 'greatest' communication does not look like an addition or a multiplication, but rather like a subtraction. It does not take place in the passage between the one and the other, but in that between the other of the one and the other of the other:

The beyond of my being is first of all nothingness. This is the absence I discern in laceration and in painful feelings of lack: It reveals the presence of another person. Such a presence, however, is fully disclosed only when the *other* similarly leans over

10. Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, p. 23.

11. Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, p. 24.

the edge of nothingness or falls into it (dies). ‘Communication’ only takes place *between two people who risk themselves*, each lacerated and suspended, perched atop a common nothingness [*l’un et l’autre penchés au-dessus de leur néant*].¹²

8. We could well say that, with Heidegger and Bataille, twentieth-century thought on community reaches its point of maximum intensity and, at the same time, its outermost limit. This is not due to the fact that twentieth-century thought experiences in their philosophies several relapses in a mythical and regressive direction; or because it is not possible to register—around and after these two authors—elaborations, developments, and new intuitions which, in different ways and with different inflections, refer back to the question of the *cum*: the writings—and lives—of Simon Weil, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jan Patočka, Robert Antelme, Osip Mandelstam, and Paul Celan bear witness to the opposite. Rather, this is due to the fact that even these thinkers could think community only starting from the problem posed, and never solved, by Heidegger and Bataille. It is for the same reason that all that separates us from them—the philosophy, sociology, and political studies of the second half of the twentieth century—remains forgetful of the question of community. Or, worse, it contributes to the distortion of community whenever it reduces it to the defence of new particularisms. Only in the last few years, this drift—experienced and produced by all the ongoing debates on individualism and communitarianism—has been countered, especially in France and Italy, by an attempt to launch a new philosophical reflection on community that starts exactly at the point where the previous one was interrupted in the mid of the twentieth century (see Esposito 1998; Agamben 1993; Nancy 1991; Blanchot 1984).¹³ The necessary reference to Heidegger and Bataille that characterizes this reflection is accompanied, however, by the clear awareness that we live with the inevitable exhaustion of their lexicon, that is, in a condition—both material and spiritual—which they could not know fully.

Once again, I am alluding to nihilism, and more precisely to the further acceleration that took place within its uninterrupted ‘completion’ during the last decades of the twentieth century. It is perhaps precisely this acceleration that allows—but also imposes on us—a recommencement of the thought on community in a direction which Heidegger and Bataille could only guess, but not thematize. What direction? Without presuming to offer an exhaustive answer to what is the question of our time, it is inevitable to take another look at the figure of the ‘nothing’. Nancy, the contemporary author who, more than any other, has the merit of having made a breach in the closure of the thought on community, writes the following: ‘The question is rather to know how to conceive of the “nothing” itself. Either it is the void of truth, or it is nothing else than the world itself and the meaning of being-in-the-world’.¹⁴ How should we understand this alternative, and is

12. Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, pp. 20-1.

13. See: Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, Maurice Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable*, Paris, Minuit, 1984, Esposito, *Communitas*, Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Lisa Garbus, Peter Connor, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

14. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 62.

it really an alternative? To this end, we could observe that, from a certain point of view, it is precisely the absence of community—and even its desertification—that shows us its necessity as what we lack, and even as our own lack; as a void that does not ask to be filled in by new or ancient myths, but rather re-interpreted in light of its own ‘not’.

But the sentence from Nancy I have just quoted tells us something more—something more precise—which we could summarize in the following way. The outcome of the extreme completion of nihilism—the absolute uprooting; the unfolding of technology; the integral character of globalisation—has two faces which we should not only distinguish, but also make interact: we could say that community is nothing else than the limit that separates and, at the same time, links them. On the one hand, sense appears to be lacerated, stretched out of shape, desertified—and this is the destructive aspect which we know so well: the end of any generality of sense, and the loss of mastery over the overall meaning of our experience. But, on the other hand, this very deactivation, this devastation, of general meaning opens the space of the contemporary world to the emergence of a singular sense that coincides precisely with the absence of sense and, at the same time, reverses it into its opposite. It is precisely when every given sense—located in a basic framework of reference—disappears that the sense of the world as such makes itself visible, reversed in its outside, with no reference to any sense, or meaning, that transcends it. Community is nothing other than the border, or transition, between this immense devastation of sense and the necessity that each singularity, each event, each fragment of existence must be in itself meaningful. It refers back to the character, both singular and plural, of an existence freed from any presupposed, or imposed, or postponed sense; of a world reduced to itself, able to be simply what it is: a planetary world, without direction or cardinal points. A nothing-else-than-world. And it is this nothing in common which is the world that associates us in the condition of exposition to the hardest absence of sense and, at the same time, to the opening of a sense yet to be thought.

Translated by Lorenzo Chiesa

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