Călina Părău

Community and Togetherness after the Non-sharable

Abstract: The following text tries to analyze and discuss the possibilities of talking about *togetherness* and community after the 20th century's understanding of collective power. How are we to envision community as a configuration around the negative and weak concepts of secret, absence and lack? *Togetherness* has to be thought outside essences and properties, following the theories of inter-subjectivity as the bare interval between fragments of stories and miss-recognitions in the interplay between self and the other. Can we talk about a form of community based on what we do not share or have in common, a *togetherness* defined as the empty wound of history? Why has the *bond* model of community been replaced by an *interruption* model of *communitas*? These are the general questions that this paper tries to address by accepting the impossibility of inquiring the world otherwise than a *with-world* which is always already an inherited world.
Keywords: Common; The Other; The Secret; Absence; Nihilism.

CĂLINA PĂRĂU
Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
calina_parau@yahoo.com

The Secret Inside the Frame of Encounter

The opening towards the others, as well as the possibility of *being outside oneself*, necessary for the foundational re-appropriation of this *outside*, in the creation of a community, is mediated by the concept of the secret. Carrying oneself towards the outside by means of a secret does not mean the promise of exposing or exhibiting the self, neither the concealment of the *being-towards-the-other*, but the act of extending the self and the other into the limitless openness of the unthought and the unknown. This condition of togetherness as the essence of sharing something beyond the means of representation is the definition we will give to *community*.

Inside the encounter which founds a community there lies the call of the *elsewhere*, the secret, performing the subject as both an appearance and a disappearance, a figure which comes surrounded by an entire unknown world, preventing the possibility of easily acknowledging and naming something that would be *our world*. Even when we admit to saying *our world*, we know there is a secret that makes the world a joining together of intervals and lacks which connect our stories in their

reciprocal unfinished pictures. The secret leaves room for writing about the other, each encounter being the return and the re-positioning towards the unknown that sits in front of us, moving inside strategies of social convention.

Derrida understands the secret as the *condition of any bond*, because in order to have something to share or to communicate, we need the pre-condition of the non-sharable. Even before community, inter-subjectivity itself is directed by the phenomenology of the secret, understood as "that which is cut off from any bond, detached, and which cannot itself bind; it is the condition of any bond, but it cannot bind itself to anything-this is the absolute, and if there is something absolute it is the secret."[1] For Derrida, the secret is a *resistance* towards the immediateness of the world and towards that which makes *presence* the ultimate source of experience. The secret does not accept the shared time frame of an encounter, the contemporaneity of a conversation, re-calling the intrusions of a certain *before this* or *after this*, which makes the time of the secret a time before ourselves, a debt towards precedence and towards what we no longer are. This makes Derrida talk about the secret as the *tout autre*, as that through which we experience the irreversible mystery of the other. Not the secret around *what the subject is* generates this *tout autre*, because this holds a possibility of knowing, of discovering, but the secret of what the subject no longer is:

> Somehow, this secret that we *speak* of but are unable to *say* is, paradoxically, like good sense in Descartes, the best shared-thing in the world; but it is

the sharing of what is not shared: we know in common that we have nothing in common. There may be an unlimited consensus on the subject, but the consensus is of no use, since it is a consensus on the fact that the singular is singular, that the other is other, that *tout autre est tout autre.*[2]

The Interruption Model of Community

The founding of community not on the *common danger*, the common belief or the common *something*, but on the common nothing is important for the way in which we draw the closure of a community, after the 20th century failed projects of the masses. The common nothing makes the construction of community not a certain re-appropriation of a supposed essence, but the circling in of the separation that can become the floor on which we walk. Hannah Arendt understands *distance* as being the figure of community and draws her metaphor far from the conception of community as a whole: "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."[3] In Arendt's view, it is separation and distance that draw the subjects together, as if the emptiness in-between would work as the joining force of subjectivities. *The table* which stands between is the space of silences, of passages with no ends or beginnings and, most of all, of the encounter between what has been sent, thrown, obliterated. It is a space of horizontality which does not function as a common ground, but

as a plane of separation between the subject and his own actions and words that can only be recuperated after they accomplished their own destination.

The thinking of community after the first half of the 20th century turns from Hobbes pyramidal image of the Leviathan towards the image of the empty centre which engulfs the entire construction of the collective body into the circular image of the diametrical encounter. This imagining of the community privileges the metaphor of inter-subjectivity over the metaphor of the collective shape. Which are the consequences of this shift and why the *interruption* model of community becomes a substitute for the *bond* model of community? The continual rehearsal of this *interruption* is the staging of a community which always has to re-write the way towards itself as a discontinuation to preserve the position of the subject, of the individual before the community. Roberto Esposito, in *Communitas – The Origin and Destiny of Community*, also uses the *interruption* model to grasp the possibility of *communitas*: "It isn't the subject's expansion or multiplication but it's exposure to what interrupts the closing and turns it inside out: a dizziness, a syncope, a spasm in the continuity of the subject."[4] It is precisely the discontinuation of community that gives the subject back to itself, turning *communitas* into a *concord fiction* that links the given and the unfathomable,[5] creating that concordance of the subject with its *half-way position*,[6] between the beginning and the end, between the individual and commonality. *The half-way position*, as Iser understands it, following Kermode's *Sense of an Ending*, is the fictional mode of creating meaning as *creatures of deficiency* which

are never present to themselves, situated in-between a beginning and an end that are impossible to link. We could argue that this inhabited divisiveness of the *half-way position* articulates the subject inside its call of concordance and community. The non-situated *half-way position* is what we have in common as the potentiality of an unwritten totality between the beginning and ending, between the atomic and the gestalt. This middle-ground entertains the secret as the necessary impossibility of being wholly with this *half-way position*. The secret relies on the outside and the permanent externalization that this *half-way position* requires in order to resist to its own concealment. The secret calls for what is outside *the half-way position*, awaiting for the meaning, for the correspondence between beginning and ending, particularity and universality. The metaphor of *the half-way position* inherits Arendt's spatialization of community as *the table* that stands between, because both conceptions rely on unfinished strategies of crossing the void or the empty space between beginnings and endings. The silences and secrets around *the half-way position* come from the impossibility of hearing its own echo inside the openness of unsettled narratives. That is why *the half-way position* is the condition of hearing the other as part of the unfinished resonance of the self.

Thus, we could argue that the *interruption* model of community has replaced the *bond* model of community, because of the need to re-think *the half-way position* as the condition of being inside history and common existence. The *interruption* model asks for a fictional fulfilling of its gaps, disclosing its own need of *concord fictions* in order to structure the collective possibility

of assemblage, while the *bond* model relies on semblance, identification and commitment. That is why, after the totalitarian systems, the possibility of togetherness is thought of in terms of gaps and intervals that need to be fictionally bridged. The *bond* has been replaced by the *gap* after the 20th century sought for that *collective power* that would grant the promise of the infinite over the individual. The *interruption* model does not try to negate finitude, but embraces it and founds its strategies of encounter upon it.

Anabasis and the Path of Return

Anabasis is a concept Badiou uses to describe the movement of the 20th century, as it was conceived from within, from the middle of the century's drives and events. Badiou starts from the premise that the century was able to think itself in the process of its ideological, collective and emotional becoming by means of *a passion for the real* reiterated under different forms in the philosophy of arts. The word *anabasis* reunites the meaning of an ascent that should also formulate itself as a return (a return home, a return of the lost, a return to something invented by the return itself). *Anabasis* is the *movement of lost men*, an attempt to think and visualize the return which is not certain whether there is a "path of return. Anabasis is thus the free invention of a wandering that will have been a return, a return that did not exist as a return-route prior to the wandering."[7]

A return always projects itself ahead of space, in search of place and time, aiming at releasing movement from the claws of pure wandering into the invested path of a guided return. A return becomes a return on its way back to itself, in the pursuit of finding out that there is a home at the core of displacement itself. *Anabasis* is one of the conditions of being outside oneself, in the direction of a return, leading the soul towards a home that becomes a home because of the path itself. There is no root which calls back the road, because the return itself fixes the ground on its lost movement towards something that can foresee its coming and recognize the trajectory as a return. *Anabasis* is not only the movement which traces the internal movement of the 20th century, but also the geography of all the projects of community as a call of return, as the home of *together* which becomes a home after the wandering has postulated a route.

"Anabasis" is also the title of one of Paul Celan's poems, which is perceptively analyzed by Badiou in his attempt to understand *anabasis* as *a poetic sign for the century*. In Michael Hamburger's translation, the poem sounds like this:

> This
> narrow sign between walls
> the impassable-true
> Upwards and Back
> to the heart-bright future.
>
> There.
>
> Syllable-
> mole, sea-
> coloured, far out
> into the unnavigated.
>
> Then:
> buoys,
> espalier of sorrow-buoys,
> with those

breath reflexes leaping and
lovely for seconds only-: light-
bellsounds (dum-
dun-, un-,
unde suspirat
cor),
re-
leased, re-
deemed, ours
Visible, audible thing, the
tent-
word growing free:

Together.

Anabasis is the *Upwards and Back,* following a sign, a secret built *between walls* and already-given meanings. The return remembers a *There* which it has not seen before, a memory of the future, the remembered origin inside a territory that has not been discovered yet. Celan uses all the power of the word *There*, in its solitude, in its designated awaiting, the *There* of all arrivals to come and communities to live. The lost things on the *path of return* are *the unnavigated*, the surface on which no boat can built a return, but there are calls and signs in "the unnavigated" as well. Badiou beautifully interprets the *the light-bell-sounds*, *the sorrow-buoys* as the pour, almost unperceived calls of the Other:

The meaning of this image is that anabasis requires the other, the voice of the other. Assuming the call-its enigma-Celan breaks with the theme of an empty and self-sufficient wandering. Something must be encountered. The maritime images function as indices of alterity. We could say that the theme of alterity replaces the theme of fraternity[8].

This *pure call* which can be barely heard or seen, which cannot be deciphered because it is a secret, the possibility of returning and answering the call on the basis of the unknown, is the central point in thinking the promises of community. It is no longer the *brother* I answer to in the *unnavigated* seas of a return, but to the other as stranger, completely unveiled by semblances and self-reassuring pictures. The question of thinking community becomes, thus, a matter of envisioning the possibilities of answering to the unknown, *re-leased* and *re-deemed*, an unknown which is no longer a threat, because it is so much *ours, visible, audible thing*. The *tent-word*, *together*, shelters and protects the unknown even at the core of the intimacy of a tent. *Together* is no longer the word of a solid construction, it is a *tent-word*, the shelter of that lack of home, an improvisation, the tent of the circus people, *together* as the house of the nomads, of those who keep returning without ever arriving. Seeing the buoys on the *path of return* keeps the lost men in the illusion of *anabasis*, the movement which draws us towards the sign of the other, without ever being something other than the surfacing, floating sign of the limits and borders between deep waters and low waters. The buoys is not the anchor of something which travels and moves, but the anchor of the immobile, dead body itself, an anchor which anchors itself in order to become a *visible thing*, a sign in the *unnavigated*. The sign of the other is also the sign of the *unnavigated*, the secret, which still holds the possibility of *together* as an *impassable-true*, a *narrow sign between walls*.

Going back to Alain Badiou's *The Century*, we understand the centrality of the problem he poses asking whether there can be a *we* that is not planned as the ideal of an *I* and which resists its own impulse of becoming a subject. How can we conceive of a *we* that remains a *we,* disintegrated, accidental, spontaneous? "How are we to move from the fraternal 'we' of the epic to the disparate 'we' of togetherness, of the set, without ever giving up on the demand that there be a 'we'?"[9] This *disparate* "*we*" turns the shared secret into a shared accident, giving meaning to a *half-way position* that encounters the other in its own accidental "half-way position." In its elusive manifestations, the *disparate "we"* does not have a nucleus as its central core, but a multitude of gaps and voids as the cores of its gratuitous foundations. *The principle of incompleteness* is not the fusing force of the *disparate* "*we*," because it is not a "we" that fulfills or enacts the other. The misrecognitions, misplacement, the montages, the de-facements, compositions and decompositions across times and places are the internal mechanics of this kind of togetherness that grounds itself beyond representation. But, still, one question remains open: Is the *disparate* "*we*" a form of community or just another way of defining inter-subjectivity?

The Ethics of Encounter

This way of thinking inherits Levinas understanding of the asymmetric encounter with the other, inside which this other is not absorbed inside the "I," neither is it a mirror of the self, but it appears only after I can imagine something more important than my life, transcending my own

law of being. Following Levinas, Michael J. Shapiro addresses the cultures of war by proposing (as a solution against violence) an *ethics of encounter* which moves the subjects and their perception of each other outside the *violence of representation*. Inside the *ethics of encounter* the Other is not mirrored, constructed by means of a self-reflection which draws the line between different and similar, but the Other appears in the effort to keep him outside totalizing concepts, inside the impossibility of grasping him inside an image or a narrative. We are talking about the possibilities of an encounter without appropriation, which does not seek for means of imprinting, which accepts the condition of being a witness of the unknown, of the secret in the Other. The *ethics of encounter* is necessary in thinking about community and it also sustains the logic of the secret in building the incomplete appropriation of the other inside the shared unknown of community.

The secret, belonging to a relation of entrusting, opens up the possibility of thinking responsibility as the carrying of something that is not mine, although it is inscribed in me by means of the bond of keeping the secret and drawing the limits of my own being around it. Responsibility is borne along with the asymmetric gaze of the other which exposes the secret of my own dwelling. The borders of the subject are delineated by the power of keeping the secret and by accepting its dissimulation as my own shape. By means of the closure drawn by the secret man inherits his own position in the world as responsibility and opening towards the other.

Following Jan Patočka's *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, Derrida (in *The Gift of Death*) points that, at the beginning, the demonic is defined as irresponsibility, as

the lack of a voice which could answer for itself and about itself. Responsibility enters the scene as the mark of freedom and singularity, substituting a history of questions with a history of answers. The capacity to answer to the other or, even, to an impersonal which draws the borders of subjectivity and particularity are deeply linked to the birth of Europe in the modern sense of the word, as Patočka shows. This is why Derrida believes that European history should be read as a history of responsibility, inside which historicity itself becomes a mode of responsibility. Historicity and contingency presupposes a secret for the subject inside history and, thus, formulates responsibility as acts of decision making on the basis of the unknown, connecting the structure of responsibility with the structure of faith. Derrida situates at the centre of the creation of meaning and responsibility the conversion from the orgiastic, platonic mystery to the christian *misterium tremendum*. This conversion stages the possibility of the first mystery donning the "gift of death" to the second mystery. The history of responsibility becomes, thus, a new understanding of death as being a gift of the old world to the new one. The care directed towards the "gift of death" makes us responsible for the *unknown* of the worlds we inherit. Although Derrida does not take up the subject of community in this text, by layering the responsibility of a time towards another time, Derrida makes it necessary to imagine community not as the shared gift or secret of those living in the same, actual plane of time, but as a community of those who inherit the *gift of death* from those they have not met. A community bound by the *gift of death* is a completely different way of situating the possibilities of encounter. In this case, community is re-imagined as a

vertical disposition and not as the horizontal individual multiplicities which share the potentiality of becoming an assemblage.

Following Pierre Nora's identification of the symbolic investments of *horizontal identity* over *vertical solidarity* when it comes to analyzing the generational encounters, Ricoeur addresses the question of why does the horizontal means of identification finds more ideological and symbolic resources than the means of belonging to the vertical picture of inherited worlds: "As the pace of change increases, how and why has the horizontal identification of individuals of roughly the same age been able to supplant all forms of vertical identification?"[10] One of the answers offered is that memory's capacity to historicize has been eliminated in favor of *pure memory*, a type of situating ourselves in time by mocking history and abolishing duration in order to be able to continually set foot inside a *present without history*. We could argue that the *present without history* is a time inside which we only inherit ourselves as the source of all possibilities of encounter. The *gift of death* cannot be received and it cannot talk from inside the historical union of those who give and those who receive. The possibility of community inside a *present without history* is only the horizontal search for the means of connection which have been cut out from the possibility of inheriting and being inside the community of a shared *gift* of time.

In the Sight of Nothingness

In his book, *Communitas - The Origin and Destiny of Community*, Robert Esposito analyzes the problem of thinking community in the history of philosophy: Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, Heidegger.

Esposito demonstrates that community is not a *property of belonging*, but the impropery of falling together. The common is no longer the shared, but the *common non-belonging*[11] of finite subjects that can only enter subjective compositions by means of their lack of the proper. From Rousseau's understanding of community as a necessary defect (the common comprising debt and mortal finitude) to Heidegger's always *being-in-the-world* (coexisting being the only form of existing, constructed on *the abyss of being a self*[12]), community is founded on the *defective condition*[13] of guilt, debt, failing, incompleteness, nothingness. The tight connection which Robert Esposito draws between nihilism and community inherits the space of Paul Celan's psalm to nothingness, written in the aftermath of a fallen historical world. It is the same nothingness of the foundation, which only grows the *No-one's-Rose* that keeps blooming in the sight of nothingness, singing the *purpleword* over the thorn. Thinking community becomes not a question of bridging the nothingness, of constructing the *tentword* in spite of it, but a matter of investing the nothing in the realm of the secret, of the absence necessary for the abysses which project us into the unlimitedness of encounters. Robert Esposito also draws a positive re-evaluation of the inter-subjective *nothing* by defining it as the absolute openness to the world of encounters: "It is this nothing held in common that is the world that joins us in the condition of exposure to the most unyielding absence of meaning and simultaneously to that opening to a meaning that still remains unthought."[14] This *condition of exposure* to both the absence of meaning and the unthought infinite of meaning is closely related to the concept of the secret which we have been discussing. The secret is not the condition which hides, but the one that exposes the subject/the other to meaning, to the urgency of a *behind* the veil which contains the unthought meaning. The secret, understood as a *condition of exposure* to meaning (without revelations), functions as the necessary non-closure of community around what it knows and shares at a precise moment in time.

Conclusion

After the 20th century's investments of the word *together*, thinking community has become a problem of defining what we share, the discourses we belong to and the inter-human impossibilities we enact. The risk of togetherness is part of the need of re-envisioning the limits of the subject inside the world and not the borders of community itself. Defining community on the basis of negativity (the lack of the subject, the insuperable secret of the other, the impossible home on the *path of return* etc.) is deeply connected to a historical memory of the individual as absence, as forgotten shadow. But it is precisely by losing the understanding of the subject as a figure of power that we can begin thinking about community as a weak figure of resistance towards the succumbing effects of inheriting shared wounds and *gifts of death* without recognizing them as our own. Community becomes, thus, the possibility of answering to that call that we do not recognize, because it is part of the non-narrative secret of the other and it calls for a return to the other outside the moment in which he always is an *other* with a known and re-told story.

Bibliography

Agamben, Giorgio, *The Coming Community*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993

Badiou, Alain, *The Century,* Polity Press, Cambridge, 2007

Critchley, Simon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas,* Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 2002

Derrida, Jacques, *The Gift of Death*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995

Derrida, Jacques; Maurizio Ferrar, *A Taste for the Secret*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001

Esposito, Roberto, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, Stanford UP, Stanford, 2010

Iser, Wolfgang, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, The Johns Hopkins UP, Baltimore, 1993

Levinas, Emmanuel, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith, The Athlone Press, London, 1999

Ricoeur, Paul, *Memory, History, Forgetting,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004

Saphiro, Michael J., *Violent Cartographies: Mapping Cultures of War*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997

Notes

1. Jacque Derrida, Maurizio Ferrar, *A Taste for the Secret*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 57.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

3. Roberto Esposito, *Communitas:The Origin and Destiny of Community*, Stanford UP, Stanford, 2010, p. 79.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

5. Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, The Johns Hopkins UP, Baltimore, 1993, p. 88.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

7. Alain Badiou, *The Century*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2007, p. 82.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

10. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004, p. 407.

11. Roberto Esposito, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 149.