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Community Building in Post-Historical Times

Abstract: The paper critically revisits the 1980-1990's writings on community of Maurice Blanchot, Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito, in an attempt to reassess their contemporary political and philosophical relevance.

Keywords: Community; Communism; Society; Maurice Blanchot; Jean-Luc Nancy; Giorgio Agamben; Roberto Esposito.

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If one rereads today the famous “community dossier” compiled in the 1980-90s and involving mainly the works of Maurice Blanchot, Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito, two curious things immediately come to mind: first, the strange feeling that, for a theoretical debate involving some of the most prominent continental philosophers of the time and stretching over a period of almost 15 years (1984-1998, the publication dates of the first and last pieces of the dossier), there is no element of discord whatsoever between these authors; on the contrary, everyone seems to agree with everybody else, the points of contention being imperceptible, with each author striving only to add another set of synonymic – but more and more suggestive – metaphors to the set inherited from the previous discussant. But this should not even be the main problem. The main problem has to do with the second aspect: while each author insists almost without variation around the same position concerning the community, the consensus itself revolves around nothing: their very shared common philosophical diagnostic is absolutely devoid of any positive content, historical anchorage or argumentative content. It is philosophical opacity and, hence,



outdatedness in itself – an effect, of course, of the enclosed and outdated jargon that defines and unites these authors in such a homogeneous choir. Thus, if one really had to reread today the famous “community dossier” of the 1980-90s, there could be only one possible incentive for engaging in such a tedious task: to see how little, in fact, how misleadingly little, French Theory (and its consequent avatars) has to say about our contemporary historical, social and political predicament. Considering that this “community dossier” is one of those privileged instances in which French Theory came closest to addressing the crucial aspects of its own historical and social present, this double impression – of a univocal choir, hermetic jargon, and at the same time, of an opaque, outdated and unusable diagnostic – is all the more telling.

Out of respect for this illustrious debate, I will proceed, in what follows, along its own model: in the main part of the paper, I will slowly and patiently enlist all the arguments, or rather the linguistic variations of the same 2-3 arguments contained in this debate, so as to reconstruct its liturgical feeling – an unrelenting, ritualized, negative theology of community. In the closing part of this paper, I will articulate some thoughts on the historical and political signification of the community “debate.” But, until then, we have a long and unexciting journey ahead of us – all the more so since it implies dwelling *ad infinitum* on the same blind spot.

There is a common point from which all these authors explicitly proceed, a common understanding of the profound drama of the present and of its corresponding philosophical task. But while this shared point of departure is the very point of

anchorage of these philosophies into their historical present, the way in which they frame it provides them also with their immediate way out of history. In brief, it is the problem of communism seen as both the promise and the betrayal of community. It is the historical crisis of communism (and, hence, the philosophical limits of its Marxian concept), acutely manifesting in the 1980-90s, that pushes these authors toward a necessary reflection on the problem of community. But at the same time, it is the negative theology of community – as their answer to this historical and philosophical failure of communism – that, in return, absolves them from any historical and political determination of their diagnostic. In the very same opening gesture, history is allowed to enter the philosophical lab through the emergency door, only to be immediately thrown out of it through the theological window. Now let us replay this move in slow motion.

In the first piece of the community dossier, Maurice Blanchot’s *The Unavowable Community*,¹ from the very beginning the reflection proceeds by situating the philosophical problem of community in the historical and philosophical horizon of communism. But a particular kind of communism – namely communism as the last, absolute, and hence criminal, metaphysics. “Communism,” as seen by Blanchot, is “the principle of a transparent humanity essentially produced by itself alone... [an] exigency of an absolute immanence of man to man. Here lies the seemingly healthy origin of the sickest totalitarianism” (p. 2). This is it: in this sweeping diagnostic placed at the frontispiece of thought, we have everything that Blanchot and the other authors involved in this “debate”



will have to say about communism: communism is a sick totalitarianism because it presupposes the *absolute immanence of man to man*, man's absolute presence to himself. Communism would thus be the absolute metaphysics of man, whose materialism, instead of contradicting or attenuating its metaphysical basis, actually reinforces and absolutizes it: the materialist side of communism merely presents its metaphysics with the exigency of here & now, of a complete expression and realization in the historical present. This materialist exigency actually closes down that space of promise and openness which other non-materialist humanist theological metaphysics (such as Christianity) are, precisely because of their pure idealism, forced to leave open. This is a rather crucial point, because from this perspective, materialism can be considered by Blanchot et co. not as the opposite of and, perhaps, alternative to idealism, but rather as its complete expression. Hence, if there is any hope that can still be found or articulated in philosophy, it should be on the side of a more pure idealism, which is, of course, "the unavowable," yet underlining and constitutive trait of French Theory.

Now, once communism is dismissively caricaturized and theologized in this way, the conceptual space is wide open for building the shrine of community. By decree, the genuine – "unavowable" – community will be proclaimed to be the good and promising part of communism, but without its bad part. Namely, the promise of communism, minus its social and historical determinations and conditions of possibility. But there's something more to it. The problem with communism, as seen by Blanchot, is not its specific and partially contingent historical manifestation

– which would have required a historical materialist analysis of the communist phenomenon, and this is obviously not the case here. It rather consists in the very idea of a necessary, imminent, probable or at least possible historical realization of social justice. In other words, since, as stated above, the problem with communism is precisely its materialism, its exigency of really existing human history, saving community from the ills of communism will involve not only dissociating community from the historical manifestation of actually existing communism, but rather dissociating community from *every* possible concrete manifestation, from any possible historical occurrence, and – just to be sure, since meaning is already somehow positive, hence material, hence totalitarian – from any conceivable positive signification whatsoever. What remains of the community, this unavowable, yet irreducible community, is merely an open and suspended "concept," delineated only *via negativa*, through the negation of its particular determinations: the community is "not the restricted form of a society," and nothing that "tends toward a communitarian fusion."² It is not the particular closure of society, but precisely its opening; not social fusion, but overlapping of openings and finitudes. It "creates no work" and "has no use." It is essentially without work, without finality, without a "production value as aim."³ Community is just poetry, or rather bad poetry – the abstract lyricism of the negative: death as "the true community of mortal beings: their impossible communion,"⁴ "a community that would be nothing if it did not open the one who exposes himself to it to the infiniteness of alterity"⁵; "a kind of messianism announcing nothing but its autonomy and its unworking"⁶; "a relation



such that the self is not content with recognizing the Other, with recognizing itself in it, but feels that the Other always puts it into question to the point of being able to respond to it only through a responsibility that cannot limit itself and that exceeds itself without exhausting itself,⁷ “a responsibility towards the Other that does not come from the Law but from which the latter would derive in what makes it irreducible to all forms of legality through which one necessarily tries to regulate it, while at the same time pronouncing it the exception or the extra-ordinary which cannot be enounced in any already formulated language,”⁸ “that union which always take place by not taking place”⁹ and so on.

This purely negative, unavowable community, whose glimpses can only be perceived in such delicate and fugitive instances as May 68, literary communism, or the lovers embrace, this community essentially inoperative and unrealizable – *de-soeuvrée*, a leitmotif subsequently chewed on by all the other participants in this debate – is then, considering Blanchot’s own declaration of intent, his answer to the acute historical problem of communism and the dangers it presents for any future community. And while, insofar as community is concerned, it actually says nothing (the pompous vacuity of its sermons would make it suitable even for that monument of pompous vacuity which is EU’s “social charter”), as regards communism and, thus, the acute political problem of its time, it truly drives the point home: any attempt to build communism, to reach a human and just society, is potentially totalitarian, precisely because it inevitably operates with a positive, hence restrictive, idea of humanity and justice, which inevitably projects a

Gulag of inhumanity. Certainly, while this anticommunist thesis is the only thing that rings clear in Blanchot’s otherwise impenetrable ruminations, it is far from being an original contribution to any debate whatsoever. The thesis of communism’s inherent totalitarian nature, inscribed in its core materialist messianism, was the common refrain of all the anticommunist French Left and Right in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁰ It constituted, at that time, the philosophical and/or metahistorical foundation of the neoliberal turn. In this compact and rather homogeneous anticommunist camp, if there is a particular niche to which Blanchot (and Nancy, Agamben, Esposito...) should be allocated, it is the “negative theology” wing – or what, in another place, I refer to as “material formalism,” the “passion of form” of post-metaphysical theology.¹¹ That is, what distinguishes Blanchot et co. from the other, more down-to-earth or pragmatic liberals and conservatives of this camp is the fact that, in their writings, the empty shell of communist hope, the pure and abstract promise of a true community remains as a spectral presence shining over the desert of the post-ideological and post-historical world. But nothing more than a specter, or its promise. According to the others, we should embrace the end of communism and the definitive exile of justice from history, because, in a sense, we always already have some community, even though (luckily, after all) we can never name it, realize it, or put our finger on it. If this is a relevant theoretical contribution to contemporary philosophy, then we must truly live in sad poetic times.

Such abstract elegy is the dominant genre also in Jean-Luc Nancy’s writings on the topic of community. His book *The*



*Inoperative Community*¹² (whose original version – an article by the same title published in 1983 – prompted Blanchot’s intervention in the first place) starts just as well by situating the problem of community against the background of really collapsing communism. It assumes as its proclaimed task the imperative of saving this category (community) from the dereliction afflicting its presumed, yet deformed, historical realization (communism). The similarities with Blanchot’s intervention are so complete that, in a rather telling confession from the preface to the Romanian edition of his book, Nancy himself admits that “I have never elucidated completely the reservation or reproach”¹³ that Blanchot might, or might not, have formulated in his *Unavowable Community* to Nancy’s initial article. As far as ordinary mortal readers can tell, their disagreement seems to turn around the question of whether this unavowable and inoperative community can still be somehow said or named, without turning it into something avowable and operative. If this is the case, the merit of both Blanchot’s and Nancy’s interventions is precisely to leave the question wide open, since their writings on community, because of their negative theological spirit, can hardly pass as something that is actually said or named in regard to community. In this inoperative task, both authors truly succeed.

As for the view on communism, we are still firmly entrenched in the anti-totalitarian discourse hegemonic at their time (and ours). In the same preface written for the Romanian edition, Nancy explicitly admits that his text on community took its inspiration from this “reflection on totalitarianism, which put its mark everywhere

in those years and forced everyone to a moment of reflection”¹⁴. What Nancy learned in this precious moment of reflection is that, with Marx and communism, community is forced to realize itself as its own work and in its own work, condemned to a pure and absolute “immanentism,” while the real task for philosophical thinking is instead to problematize the “communauté desouvrée.” Thus, the stage is clear: on the one hand, we have “the gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world,” the historical collapse of communism as the ultimate metaphysics of community, while on the other hand we have the all-the-more urgent task of thinking and thus saving an idea of community deprived of this metaphysical and essentialist ballast that took communism to its grave, a negative, unrepresentable, and inoperative community. “It is precisely the immanence of man to man, or it is man, taken absolutely, considered as the immanent being par excellence, that constitutes the stumbling block to a thinking of community. A community presupposed as having to be one of human beings presupposes that it effect, or that it must effect, as such and integrally, its own essence, which is itself the accomplishment of the essence of humanness... This is what we have called ‘totalitarianism,’” but it might better be named “immanentism.”¹⁵

There are at least two very crucial and not so obvious aspects in this otherwise apparently straight-forward (communism as the absolute presence of community to itself vs. the original, inoperative community) passage. The first concerns the relation between history and philosophy, between the historical collapse of really existing communism and its philosophical



autopsy. Contrary to expectation or to what Nancy's own words might suggest, it is not the historical collapse of actually existing communism that prompted his reflection on community. Again, as with Blanchot, if this had been the case, it would have required a historical materialist interrogation of what exactly was really existing communism and why it failed. But for Nancy, the fall of communism is at most a belated expression of a mortal germ contained in the communist idea from its very inception. This is visible in Nancy's remark that not only is really existing communism now dead and compromised, but so are all leftist forms of imagined communities, even the most democratic and anti-authoritarian ones: "an absolute immanence of man to man – a humanism – and of community to community – a communism – obstinately subtends all forms of oppositional communism, all leftist and ultraleftist models, and all models based on the workers' council."¹⁶ In brief, all leftist progressisms have been compromised by now – actually, from the very beginning, since they are all variations of the same metaphysics of the absolute immanence of man to man. However, as he will argue later in *Compearance*, "with the demise of communism, any onto-theological conception of community has reached its limits and has historically ended."¹⁷ This is also the reason why, argues Nancy, the argument of "betrayal" – that real communism somehow betrayed its Marxian idea – does not hold: "the schema of betrayal is seen to be untenable in that it was the very basis of the communist ideal that ended up appearing most problematic: human beings defined as producers of their own essence..."¹⁸ But then, two questions follow: why wait till the end of historical

communism in order to proclaim what one knew from its very beginning, from the definition itself – namely that it is a dangerous idea destined to fail? And in fact, was this warning – about the fatal dangers of such absolute immanentism – not stated a very long time ago, even before the philosophical or historical birth of communism, for example in Edmund Burke's rejection of the abstract idealism of the French Revolution and its presumed "rights of man"? When juggling with such absolute, theological categories, impervious to any historical mediation, one risks being left with crushing alternatives. As it also happens here, where concrete history is either a delayed and superfluous manifestation of a purely apriorical and conceptual drama (the mere empirical confirmation of the communist idea's rotten core), or the opposite, but just as impracticable alternative, namely the transparent manifestation and exhaustive realization of its ahistorical script. This prompts again the same question: what is the relation between thought and history here? For an author fiercely opposed to any attempt to identify reality with essences, for somebody who repeatedly argued against any presumed transparent reality and essentialist phenomena, there appears to be in Nancy at least one exception in which none of these reservations applies – the case of communism. In this particular case, reality is the faithful realization of the idea, and the failure of historical communism is the expression of the original failure of the communist idea, not merely some historical contingency determined by some particular historical conjecture. The least one can say is that communism is here the victim of a double standard: while community gets away with all its historical occurrences, for



whose failure the inoperative community cannot be blamed and from which it must be neatly distinguished (because it is inoperative), the idea of communism gets to account for its single, probably unrepeatable, and by all standards premature attempt of historical implementation, and its philosophical failure is to be transparently read and tightly sealed in the historical demise of the latter.

Unfortunately, Nancy's whole argument is built on this double standard: allegedly, totalitarian communism, in its immanentism, is guilty of having neglected the "ontological difference – the rupture... which breaks up the totality of things that are... from Being (which is not a 'thing')... This rupture defines a relation to the absolute, imposing on the absolute a relation to its own Being instead of making this Being immanent to the absolute totality of beings." And indeed, Nancy's treatment of the inoperative community provides it with all the privileges of the ontological difference, whose mechanism of "philosophical incognito"¹⁹ breaks apart all definable relations between Being and being, between the inoperative community and any operable community. Communism, instead, does not get to enjoy the same treatment; in its case, the ontological difference makes no difference – history is essence, and that essence is, by now, history.

The only possible explanation for this unequal treatment would be one which could ground it in the particular nature of communism, which leads us to the second crucial aspect of our quoted passage: the reason for which, in communism's case and only in its case, the Idea seems to descend and express itself completely in reality, would have to do with the defining trait of communism,

which is precisely this attempt to build real communism and finally reach human justice in the here and now. If this is the case, then, again, two important things follow: firstly, as with Blanchot, with Nancy as well, the biggest problem with Marxist communism seems to be not its idealism (the idea of a human and just society), but precisely its materialist bias or historical push – its urge to reach them in the here and now.²⁰ Without this urge, perhaps communism could also enjoy the alibi of the ontological difference and claim non-responsibility for the crimes committed in its name – in brief, it could have been just a noble, unrepresentable yet irreducible promise.

But if, on the one hand, it is precisely the historical and materialist dimension of communism's idealism that makes it the most dangerous sort of idealism, on the other hand and conversely, it is precisely its brand of highly idealist (that is, universalist, rationalist and humanist) type of totalitarianism which makes it the most dangerous kind of all existing totalitarianisms. We are talking here, of course, about the relation between communism and Nazism that this theoretical frame projects. There is a double move involved here, a double step which is nevertheless projected by the same single criterion, namely the conceptual constellation of the anti-totalitarian frame. On the one hand, the totalitarian nature of communism, its absolutely immanentist drive, places it in the same league with Nazism – another criminal attempt to immanently realize human community in its own work. While Nancy does not explicitly equate communism and Nazism (still not a very palatable conclusion at that time), this equation is easily readable between the lines²¹ and, after all, immediately deducible



from the starting diagnostic (the very concept of totalitarianism). However, on the other hand, once this equation of Nazism and communism is granted, in the name of totalitarianism, this very same concept or criterion that renders them as equivalents establishes also a sort of hierarchy between them: thus, if it is true that both communism and Nazism are dangerous “totalitarianisms” or “immanentisms,” the real and original culprit is communism itself, the utmost expression of the immanentist drive to build humanity in itself, for itself and by itself, in regards to whose absolute-ness Nazism passes at best as a secondary epiphenomenon, a particular, non-universalizable and non-rationalist, local immanentist project. Whether one explicitly embraces or not the logical conclusion of one’s own antitotalitarian reflections,²² Ernst Nolte is always patiently expecting him at the end of this journey. If totalitarianism is truly the issue, than communism is the real fish to fry.

In contrast to this absolute immanence of totalitarianism, which is by definition (the very concept of “totalitarianism”) locked in a logic of complete expression, transparency and saturation of the idea/ ideology in its historic reality, the “inoperative community” will be treated as the political expression of the ontological difference itself.²³ That is, the purely negative manner of its treatment, the dissociation of the inoperative community from any empirical formation that might be associated with its name, is what ensures that this “concept” still stands even under the “absolute weight that crushes all our horizons – the dissolution, dislocation and conflagration of community” as manifested in the historical demise of communism.

This capacity of survival would be indeed a formidable historical feat, if it were not, in fact, an *a priori*, certain gain, in relation to which history is, again, rather superfluous and irrelevant. In the same way, one could say that the concepts of democracy and unicorn survive their historical treatment in very different manners: the former – badly compromised by all its presumed empirical manifestations, the latter – since inoperative, still shining in its noble beauty in spite of all the empirical horses. If history, or phenomenalization, is the terrain of ridicule (and Nancy’s concept of “immanentism,” its substitution for the traditional one of “totalitarianism” shifts the burden precisely on this point: namely, that it is the exigency of historical realization in the here and now that distinguishes the criminal mindset of communism), then the more transcendental and anti-historical the concept, the better guaranteed its survival. From this perspective, the inoperative community is indeed the best solution there is: defined as simple “resistance to immanence” and ecstasy without work, without representation, it is nothing but “ontological difference,” nothing but the very rejection of any possible link (of causation, determination or overdetermination, expression or manifestation) between a concept and its phenomenal history. It is, to use again Lukacs’s expression, “philosophical incognito” in itself. So what is, then, or rather what is the inoperative community not? “The inoperative community cannot be revealed as the unveiled enigma of being-in-common, and hence cannot be communicated, even though it is the common as such... It has never had any future, since it could not come, nor build a future”²⁴ – a discreet expression of



disagreement with Agamben's *Community to Come*, which predates this preface. "A community of finitude, because finitude 'is' communitarian, and because finitude alone is communitarian."²⁵ "Community... assumes the impossibility of its own immanence, the impossibility of a communitarian being in the form of a subject... [it] acknowledges and inscribes the impossibility of community. A community is not a project of fusion, or in some general way a productive or operative project."²⁶ It "cannot arise from the domain of work. One does not produce it, one experiences or one is constituted by it as the experience of finitude."²⁷ Or, in the most abstract and circular formulation possible: "Community is, in a sense, resistance itself: namely, resistance to immanence. Consequently, community is transcendence: but 'transcendence' which no longer has any 'sacred' meaning, signifying precisely a resistance to immanence."²⁸

From the perspective of this abstract and formal lyricism of the negative, which Nancy shares with the other authors participating in the debate, their points of divergence look at best as mere technico-scholastic queries and pretexts for further pompous sophistication. Just like the *difference* between Blanchot and Nancy (whether the unavowable community can somehow be said or not), the point of contention between Nancy and Agamben (whether this inoperative community is still to come or is, somehow, always already there) is nothing but a poetical debate on the exact degree of existence of nothingness itself. Just like Blanchot's past (the fleeting instances of the lovers' community, May 68 etc.), Nancy's present (the already-there of the inoperative community of shared finitude)

and Agamben's future (his community to come) are not actually different domains of real, chronological time, dimensions of really existing history, but mere different metaphorical registers, from which each author can borrow depending on the state of personal mood and social demand. No wonder then that the calm and wise tone of the *Inoperative Community* ("nothing, therefore, has been lost, and for this reason nothing is lost"²⁹ – indeed, what could ever be lost from such an empty concept as the inoperative community?) is replaced by a darker and less anti-communist posture in *Compearance*, written with Jean-Christophe Bailly in the immediate aftermath of the communist collapse. Here, against the background of the Eastern ruins, anger is proclaimed by Nancy as the political feeling par excellence. One could wonder why should the communist demise be met with anger, considering it was, as demonstrated just five years before, the most extreme of the most "immanentist" totalitarianisms? On second look, this anger, while shifting moods, does nevertheless fit in with the pre-existing theoretical frame. First of all, because Nancy's anger is not exactly directed at the fall of communism per se, but at what this event could entail for any future thought or experience of community. With the benefit of hindsight, this source of anger can now be said to have been a bit exaggerated. If anything, the postcommunist experience has proved that community has been the very leitmotif of a whole trend of theoretical thinking, social activism and policy framing ever since, almost the fetishized value under whose umbrella the systematic de-socialization of society (its privatization, deregulation, flexibilization – the necessary de-immanentization



of community, one would assume) could run its course. Secondly, in as much as this eminently political anger has any specific content, it is so specific that it applies not just to communism, but to its opposite as well: if anger, as Nancy argues, should be provoked by the fact that millions of people believed in communism, and that, consequently, this phenomenon cannot be simply thrown at the dustbin of history as a mere accident, one should note that both these reasons apply to fascism as well – an aspect explicitly confirmed by Nancy himself. If, then, political anger is provoked by the demise of both communism and fascism, simply because they were both enduring mass experiments in community building, what Nancy is regretting here is nothing but what he was himself diagnosing and embracing as a long-overdue death just five years before. So much so, then, for the particular content of Nancy's political anger. Though in its abstract form, it has to be said that anger, as abstract political feeling, has been indeed, as Nancy said, the eminent feeling of the post-communist world: from the best-seller *Indignez-vous* to the triumphant right-wing populism of today, abstract anger has been the spontaneous and inarticulate reaction of all individuals and communities confronted with the steady yet unnamable destruction of society all around. From this perspective, political anger and retreat into community have been indeed the two sides of the same reactionary trend.

Now that the basic conceptual procedure of Blanchot's and Nancy's takes on community has been laid out, we can have a faster look at Agamben's and Esposito's interventions in the same debate. In his 1990 book *The Coming Community*,³⁰

Giorgio Agamben inherits the abstract negative lyricism of community from his French forerunners, while adding to it two new and even more opaque metaphorical registers: that of Latin and mathematics – or more exactly, a Latinized poetical theory of ensembles. Agamben's investigation focuses rather on the elements composing the “coming community,” the so-called “whatever being” [la singolarità qualunque] or *quodlibet*. However, the possible gain in specificity or determination that this focus on the internal elements of the true community might provide is quickly lost due to the, again, purely negative, abstract or simply mystical way of defining them: the “whatever being” – the “being to come” – is said to be analogous to those theological figures which are the inhabitants of limbo, who, having not received the baptism, are deprived of a destiny and live happily in this divine abandon, outside of the Christian economy of salvation³¹. This is a nice and wise way to say, again, that this coming true community should be lived and conceived outside of any onto-theological logic and as immune to any “immanentist” possible project, work or representation. The whatever being is neither a gender nor an individual, it is simply its manner of being, the “original mannerism of being, neither accidental nor necessary, but... continually engendered from its own manner”³². It is not “so much a property that determines and identifies it as an essence, but rather an improproperty, one that is assumed and appropriated as its unique being”³³; not simply potent or impotent, but “capable of its own impotency.”³⁴ This whatever being, and its community to come, is, of course, outside both ethics and ontology. However, “there is in effect something that humans are and



have to be, but this something is not an essence, nor properly a thing: it is the simple fact of one's own existence or potentiality."³⁵ On this poetic basis, it is indeed hard to settle the debate opposing Agamben and Nancy, whether this community is one that is forever to come, or one always already there. After all, aren't we all, in each of our semi-operative and semi-avowable empirical communities, always already living as our own manner of being, even when – or even more when – living in an improper way, when “capable of our own impotency”? On this poetic and abstract basis, the matter is undecidable – not so much because undecipherable, but because there is not much to decipher and decide in its either reading – as “to come” or “already there.” The only occasions in which certain matters are decided in Agamben's *Coming Community* are his rare excursions from theology and into the political situation of the day. In this register, particularly notable are his revelation that “today we would have to say that there are no longer social classes, but just a single planetary petty bourgeoisie, in which all social classes are dissolved,”³⁶ and his ruminations, occasioned by the events in Tiananmen, on the nature of politics to come: “The novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization.”³⁷ These two remarks say more than all the liturgy of the coming community, and one should say that, in at least two senses, they are quite adequate: yes, indeed, this simplistic understanding of the “coming politics” (as the State vs. the humanity of

singularities) is indeed the necessary consequence of the anti-totalitarian frame, and explains the reason for which this anti-totalitarian discourse has been a very useful strategic tool not only in the Cold War battle against communism, but – perhaps even more – in the neoliberal restructuring of the post-communist world, providing all the philosophical arguments for its de-socialization, de-etatization and de-immanentization as necessary conditions for the liberation of the entrapped whatever-petty-bourgeois-being. Consequently, and secondly, one has to say that, indeed, this recipe for the coming politics and the otherwise gross sociological error of the proclaimed dissolution of all classes in a global petty bourgeoisie, have provided indeed the pattern for some of the most significant political trends of our time: indeed, the resistance of the global middle classes to the oppression of the State, their roaring Poujadism and moral anger against the corruption of the whole political class have been the most notable and continuous trends of our reactionary times. Once again, as with Nancy or Blanchot, also with Agamben, their reflections on community end up either in a cloud of abstract, formal, negative, circular or contradictory formulations, unusable, undecidable, if not tautological and self-evident metaphors, or – let us admit, perhaps in spite of their author's intention, but in still predictable ways – end up justifying or at least happily pre-announcing some of the most dangerous involutions of our contemporary political world.

Finally, in the heavily Heideggerian infused and more political philosophy oriented *Communitas*,³⁸ Roberto Esposito continues on the same track of abstract &



negative approach to community, while at the same time choosing what is, after all, the most direct and most accessible form of appropriate *a priori* deduction: etymological speculation. Community is thus said to derive from *Communitas*, which is opposed to *immunitas* (closure, property, essence), and is defined as the shared (*co-*) negativity (*munus*, which signifies lack, absence, and exposure to the other). This is why community, as such, does not belong to the realm of ontology, of positive beings, but to the real of deontology – it is not a thing, but describes rather a duty of assuming its own impossibility. On this basis, the original community is to be defined, again, not as the sharing of some property or belonging, but as the common and mutual exposure to improprerty and ex-proprertiation. Community is the “sharing of the impossibility of community,”³⁹ because “what the members of a community share, based upon the complex and profound meaning of *munus*, is rather an expropriation of their own essence.”⁴⁰

We already know where this is leading, so we can stop here our critical incursion through the writings that compose the community dossier of the 80-90’s. In its aftermath, an awkward thing happened to its reception: on the one hand, it has been viewed ever since as a highly relevant philosophical dialogue, from which any theoretical or practical approach to community has plenty to gain. This encomiastic revisitation of the debate has been even more intense in these last years, with scholar after scholar churning out praises to its extraordinary contributions: Oliver Marchart (2007), Ana M. Luszczynska (2012), Brian Elliott (2010, 2011), Ignaas Devisch (2014) or Greg Bird (2016) are just some of the contemporary scholars that paid their respects

to the forerunners’ approach to community. Yet on the other hand, when these scholars are to name what exactly is the precious contribution and the highly relevant conclusions that we can take from this debate, nothing much stands out, except the generally recognized fact that Blanchot et. co. warned us against the danger of conceiving community as a positive shared property or essence. Apart from this negative insight and the theological verbiage that surrounds it, nothing much appears to remain, even in the eyes of such dedicated scholars, except a certain undefinable epochal relevancy, a certain *Zeitgeist* infusing and respiring from the debate.⁴¹ In this (and only this) particular sense, our diagnostic tends to agree with their rather tacit conclusion: indeed, even if there is not much philosophical content, historical determination, sociological grasp or political strategy to be saved from the debate, the “community dossier” of the 1980-90s should be still seen as quite significant for our contemporary world. In at least two respects, both of which derive, in fact, from the conceptual nucleus of the debate itself – the problematization of the true community as negative theology, against the background of the positive, immanentist theology of really collapsing communism. The two aspects that derive from this conceptual core are, on the one hand, the misleading, but convenient (for antitotalitarian purposes), identification of communism as theory and practice of *the community*, and on the other hand, the view on *society*, in its dialectical relation to community, that this conceptual nucleus entails – or rather conveniently blurs.

The first aspect can be approached by a very simple, even if perhaps counter-intuitive question: why, after all, should



communism be approached in the first place as a theory and practice of community? Apart from the etymologic proximity, and if one is to take into consideration, let us say, Weber's classificatory definitions of such terms,⁴² or perhaps even Marx's writings and the consequent communist historical experience, it is quite clear that, in the conceptual opposition between community and society, communism stands clearly on the side of society: it is a thought, project and experience of a rational society, not a longing for an emotional, brotherly community. The only, but quite convenient, reason for which communism should be approached and criticized as a community project or experience is that, in this way, its historical-materialist dimension is completely evacuated from the get-go. If it's about community, then it's all about theology – the familial *esprit de corps* based on affectual, emotional, or traditional ties, to reshuffle just a bit Weber's classical terms. But in this way, the authors engaged in the "community dossier" practically share without residue all the presuppositions and pre-accusations of the anti-totalitarian discourse, which condemns communism as the criminal expression of a fanatic, eschatological idea. As already mentioned, the only difference from the general anti-totalitarian front that distinguishes the authors involved in the community dossier is that, with them, once communism is theologized in this way, and then properly exorcized of its immanentist demon, the empty and abstract scheme, the purely negative theology of community is still to be saved as the pure self-affectation of its own lack, be it as forever deferred promise, or as insignificant and basic always-already fact. What we actually have here, in this

treatment of communism as immanentist theology of community, is the reversed repetition of an argument long time ago mocked by Marx himself in the pages of *The German Ideology*: it is Destutt de Tracy's deliberate confusion of property and personal identity, *propreté* and *propre*, *Eigentum* and *Eigenthheit*, on whose basis he argued that a communist abolition of private property would ultimately mean the abolition of one's personal identity and, inversely, that private property is as natural and irreducible as one's own identity.⁴³

In a reversed way, we encounter the exact same confusion (between community as sharing of property and community as the sharing and expression of the proper) both in our authors' *a priori* rejection of communism as "immanentism" or totalitarianism (which deliberately reads in a theory and practice of a rational society of common ownership a fantastic theology of a poetic community of immanent and exclusive identity), and in their construction of the "inoperative community" as lacking a proper (essence, identity or property), as the pure exposition of its impropriety. As Balibar rightly remarked when discussing Derrida's deconstruction of the proper,⁴⁴ this attempt to overcome the metaphysics of the proper and property (for example, as inscribed in Locke's theory of property as the paradigmatic structure of mainstream liberal individualism) risks ending up in a reversed, negative theology, in which deconstruction itself is the in-deconstructible, while alienation and impropriety are the ultimate inalienable identity. This is the inescapable idealist circle of theology, be it natural, revealed or negative, and breaking away from it is possible only by way of a historical materialist opening, or at least



by a minimal sociological patience to not drown apriorically the real issue of a possible just society, liberated from the impersonal oppression of private property, in the poetic mist and theological waters of the *epekeina tes ousias*.

The second undying source of contemporary relevance of this debate springs from the strategic effects of this conveniently misappropriated approach (the theology of community as the promise and exigency for the postcommunist world). There is something at the same time problematic and yet revealing in the contemporary turn and veritable fetishization of the community – a turn which is not even so new by now, and that took off from the same *new left* milieu from which this “Heideggerian left” also somehow descends. On the one hand, community is something so banal – we all live, at least in an immediate way, in some sort of tribes, this goes without saying. On the other hand – and here we can glimpse the strategic function of this concept – the overextension and abuse of this banal notion is itself the expression of the

political and social regression of our time, the result of the evacuation of the properly historical-materialist and genuinely political dimension of society in its totality (with its fundamental structure and conditions of reproduction) and of its disintegration into moralized and abstract local indignation and community defense. In some way, indeed, community has been – in contrast to our authors worries, yet in line with their continuous emphasis – the most successful social formation of our posthistorical world: whether theorized or experienced, whether deliberately joined or coercively condemned to, whether under the form of an anarchist commune, gated petty bourgeois community, radical sect, refugee camp or shared life-style subculture, the walls of community have spread everywhere on the derelict land of the de-socialized society. Community, in this context, is nothing but the reverse of (and refuge from) the asocial, inhuman, capital-mediated society, the measure of society’s non-mastery of itself. This unavowable or un-dis-avowable community is the inoperative society of unnamable capitalism.

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NOTES

1. Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, New York: Station Hill Press, 1988 [original edition 1983].
2. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
10. Cf. Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left. The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s*, Berghahn Books, 2004; see also CIA's 1985 report, "France: Defection of the Leftist Intellectuals," <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP86S00588R000300380001-5.pdf>.
11. Alex Cistelean, "The Theological Turn of Contemporary Critical Theory," *Telos*, no. 167, summer 2014.
12. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, Minneapolis & Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, [original edition: 1986].
13. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Comunitatea absentă*, Cluj: Idea, 2005, p. 10.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 3. The same accusation of a metaphysics of productivism underlined French Theory's approach to communism. See, for example, Jean Baudrillard, *Le miroir de la production*; or see Nancy's later elaboration on Marx's "teleo-eschatological logic" in the essay "Urbi et orbi" (published in *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2007). Suffice it to say that this accusation of immanentism and metaphysics of production misses the point of even that "dogmatic" Marxian thesis from the infamous Introduction to *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, according to which men make history, but not in conditions of their own choosing. It is precisely this distance between human society as subject (men make history) and human society as object (in conditions not of their choosing) which opens up the playground of historical materialism and contingency that forbids any theological or metaphysical closure.
16. Nancy, *Comunitatea absentă*, p. 2.
17. Jean-Christophe Bailly, Jean-Luc Nancy, *La comparation*, Paris: Christian Bourgois Editeur, 1991, p. 35.



18. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
19. Georg Lukács, "Heidegger Redivivus," *Europe*, no. 39, March 1949.
20. From the same preface for the Romanian edition of *The Inoperative Community*, a relevant passage in this regard: "this communitarian theology, latent until Marx, indicates a displacement and occultation. The mystical element approaches the civic element." Thus, the problem with Marxist communism is not only its communitarian theology, but that, for the first time, this underlining idealist trend strives for completion – it is no longer merely latent.
21. "This is why political or collective enterprises dominated by a will to absolute immanence have as their truth the truth of death... Thus the logic of Nazi Germany was... effectively, the logic of sacrifice aimed at all those in the 'Aryan' community who did not satisfy the criteria of *pure* immanence... The fully realized person of individualistic or communistic humanism is the dead person" (pp. 12-13).
22. This obviously does not happen with Nancy. Yet the "Heideggerian Left" has inherited at least this particular ability from its master – the ability to disown and deny the concrete or immediate consequences of one's own premises (cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). The alibi for all this disavowal is, of course, ontological difference and the philosophical incognito it provides.
23. Oliver Marchart, *Post-foundational Political Thought. Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*, University of Edinburgh Press, 2007, [*Gîndirea politică postfundamentalistă*, Cluj: Idea, 2011, p. 69.]
24. Nancy, *Comunitatea absentă*, p. 10.
25. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 27.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
30. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, University of Minnesota Press, 1993 [original Italian edition 1990].
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
38. Roberto Esposito, *Communitas. Origine e destino della comunità*, Torino: Einaudi, 1998.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
41. This tension is particularly visible in Brian Elliott, who, while recognizing plainly the debate's "serious shortcoming of failing to give a credible account of collective resistance to oppressive power," which "stems from a prioritizing and over-valorizing of the figure of passivity and results in the conspicuous absence of any plausible model of collective praxis," nevertheless claims that "the writings of Nancy and Agamben [on community] provide a useful counterpoint to the more mainstream and dominant theories of liberal politics" and "useful resources for addressing some of the shortcomings of" these theories. As this article tries to suggest, it is precisely the negative abstraction of their writings of community that makes them the harmless route companions and mere theological supplement of the "more mainstream and dominant theories of liberal politics."
42. Community or "communal relation" "based on a subjective feeling of the parties, whether affectual or traditional, that they belong together... may rest on various types of affectual, emotional, or traditional bases. Examples are a religious brotherhood, an erotic relationship, a relation of personal loyalty, a national community, the *esprit de corps* of a military unit. The type case is most conveniently illustrated by the family." Society – "a rationally motivated adjustment of interests or a similarly motivated agreement,



whether the basis of rational judgment be absolute values or reasons of expediency... The purest cases of associative relationships are: (a) rational free market exchange, which constitutes a compromise of opposed but complementary interests; (h) the pure voluntary association based on self interest (*Zweckverein*), a case of agreement as to a long-run course of action oriented purely to the promotion of specific ulterior interests, economic or other, of its members; (c) the voluntary association of individuals motivated by an adherence to a set of common absolute values (*Gesinnungsverein*), for example, the rational sect, insofar as it does not cultivate emotional and affective interests, but seeks only to serve a 'cause.' (Max Weber, *Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978, pp. 40-41)

43. Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, New York: International Publishers, 1970, chapter 3.

44. Etienne Balibar, "Possessive Individualism Reversed: From Locke to Derrida," *Constellations*, vol. 3, no. 9, 2002. Particularly revealing is this passage, in which Balibar seems to accuse Derrida's deconstruction of the proper of a sort of similar "philosophical incognito" that Lukacs detected in Heidegger and that we have identified in the "community dossier": "We may ask if we are not still, and more than ever, in the transcendental movement that seeks to disentangle the subject from its own empiricity, from its 'ontological' appearance, but in order to retrieve it in a retreat, possibly with another, more 'impersonal' name (*Dasein, Ereignis, differance, trace, or gift*)" (p. 312).