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The endless community of writing

Abstract: The article provides a critical examination of conventional concepts of community, which traditionally relied on shared presence and a sense of completeness, whether tied to a nation, idea, language, land, race, and others. However, contemporary perspectives suggest that defining community in this manner is increasingly untenable, as the notion of completeness has proven illusory. Today's communities cannot depend on the traditional foundations of presence. Consequently, this article explores potential future directions for understanding community beyond these metaphysical constructs. The discussion delves into philosophical efforts to conceptualize a postmodern, post-metaphysical community. The central focus is on Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of the 'inoperative community' from the early 1980s, as well as Maurice Blanchot and his idea of the 'unavowable community,' Georges Bataille with his idea of the 'negative community, the community of those who have no community,' and Jacques Derrida, who introduced the concept of 'community of the question or community of allegoresis.'

Keywords: Community, Blanchot, Nancy, Derrida, Absence, Writing, Question

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Neskončna skupnost pisave

Povzetek: Članek podaja kritiko ustaljenih konceptov skupnosti, ki so tradicionalno temeljili na skupni prisotnosti in ideji polnosti, ne glede na to, ali so bili vezani na narod, idejo, jezik, zemljo, raso itd. Vendar pa sodobni razmisleki kažejo, da je opredelitev skupnosti na ta način vedno bolj nevzdržna, saj sta se pojma polnosti in prisotnosti izkazala za iluzorna. Današnje skupnosti ne morejo temeljiti na tradicionalnih pojmovanjih prisotnosti. Posledično ta članek raziskuje možne prihodnje smeri za razumevanje skupnosti onkraj teh metafizičnih konstruktov. Razprava se pogloblja v filozofska prizadevanja za konceptualizacijo postmoderne, postmetafizične skupnosti. Osrednji poudarek je na pojmu »nedelujoče skupnosti« Jean-Luca Nancyja iz zgodnjih osemdesetih let prejšnjega stoletja, poleg tega pa so predstavljeni še Maurice Blanchot in njegova ideja »neizrekljive skupnosti«, Georges Bataille s svojo idejo o »negativni skupnosti, skupnosti tistih, ki nimajo skupnosti«, ter Jacques Derrida, ki je uvedel koncept »skupnosti vprašanja ali skupnost alegoreze«.

Ključne besede: skupnost, Nancy, Blanchot, Derrida, odsotnost, pisava, vprašanje

Thinking² about democracy, forms of government, and political decision-making must begin with thinking about the communal being. The crisis of the political is, above all, a crisis of community (coinciding above all with the proclaimed end of the tremendous communitarian projects), which in itself is first and foremost a crisis of truth and a crisis of the metaphysical foundations (i.e., the assumptions of purity, self-presence, simultaneity, originality, homogeneity, transparency, and others) that have dominated traditional notions of community. Today, as we grapple with the utter emptiness of the term 'political' itself, where it simply no longer denotes a topos of communal decision-making, we face the difficult task of thinking communally and thinking community. This is certainly no easy task when all the registers for this reflection have been exhausted. Suppose the concept of community has the possibility of returning to philosophical thought. In this case, this community can no longer be a community of essence, identity, or origin but a community that is somehow free of all these concepts. The traditional notion of community is characterized by unreflected metaphysical assumptions that lead to aporias and conceptual dilemmas; that is, the conditions of the possibility of community simultaneously imply its impossibility, no concrete community can be at the level of its concept – the problem lies in the fact that its notions start from the schema of fullness, of identity, which is only subsequently confronted with difference; at the core of these formulations, which seem to be exhausted, is the presupposition of a transparent self-presence.

Continuing this text, we will look at some French debates from the last century that emerged from the community experience as

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the articulation of a lack. We have to start with Georges Bataille and his writings from the 1930s, which mainly revolved around the journal and secret society *Acéphale* (the term is derived from the Greek word ἀκέφαλος, which means ‘headless’). This attempted community showed that for Bataille (and his fellows), the community must be headless, decapitated, born of a decapitation, and thus represent a negation of any leading principle and reason. This can only happen through a violent act of sacrifice that allows the participants to share the profound experience of a lack that binds them together in actual communication. This Bataille’s vision of a violent and destructive vision of community shows that it must be without a recognizable end or goal. As he wrote in his unpublished postscript for the planned book on inner experience, we must return to a reflection on ‘the absence of community and insist on the negative community: the community of those who have no community’ (Bataille 1973, 483).

Immanent community

Bataille’s simple realization was that the community could never be fulfilled and that the manifestation of fullness or abundance could not be contained. The sources of fullness and completeness that underlie traditional discourses on community are not necessarily to be sought in the past as the origin or foundation of community, but the projected fullness may also lie in the future, as a collective vocation. The contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy criticizes both ideals as formulations of an ‘*immanent community*,’ i.e., a total community that controls and possesses both its beginning and its end, whose boundaries are fixed and whose law is homogeneity. In classical philosophical language, immanence denoted complete self-presence. This being is enclosed and has no contact or need for contact with the transcending other.

‘Immanence, communal fusion, contains no other logic than the suicide of the community that feeds it,’ wrote Nancy in his central text (Nancy 1991, 12). Creating a community of fullness or returning to the community of the unmediated present is undesirable and, as he claims, impossible.

A pristine community based on a unity of ideas about the common good, as postulated in the heights of ancient Greek philosophy, seems to us only a myth and a pipe dream today. However, contemporary communitarian philosophies still frequently speak of community as something that has been lost, existed on a larger scale in the past, and therefore needs to be revived. Alasdair MacIntyre, a foremost exponent of communitarian theories, expressed this attitude clearly in his major work *After Virtue* when he wrote, ‘What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the dark ages which are already upon us’ (MacIntyre 1981, 263). For the great communitarian thinker, the possibility of forming living societies in ‘the dark ages which are already upon us’ is so far from realization that he resorted to hopes for the arrival of the new Saint Benedict, a communitarian genius who will restore the prospects of living together. However, even a simple historical review rejects the idyllic image of past times on which these hopes are based. The perception of times when life was shared entirely is fueled by the idea of history as degradation – but these totalitarian ideas are based only on ideological and not on empirical grounds. This kind of philosophical nostalgia for fullness was criticized by Jacques Derrida in his early writings, primarily through studies of Levi-Strauss’s reference to the relationship between culture and nature, which in some ways are just echoes of Rousseau’s call for a return to the uncorrupted savage. Rousseau rightly recognized a decay in a contemporary decadent

culture that led to an alienated society, the instrumentalization of reason, and, consequently, the corruption of interpersonal relations. We can share his point of view, which embodies the desire for an original community, a community of present sense, entire of meaning, freedom, and love. However, at the same time, we must recognize the unrealistic character of this desire and the dangers it brings.

Community and deferral of destination

The recent past, therefore, offers us a whole series of examples of people coming together and claiming to belong based on a common essence, communities entire of presence united by the typical race, blood, soil, nation, class, caste, and others that ties its members as a kind of invisible insignia. The extreme political communitarian projects of the past century are classic examples of the entire community of self-presence; they represent a historical realization and are perceived as such. Even for these communities, fullness or realization has not been achieved yet but is imminent; it waits shortly. Nancy describes these kinds of projects as '*politics of the goal or destination*,' purposeful undertakings that seek the fulfillment of a communal project. In this context, he criticizes Heidegger's conception of *Mitsein* in *Being and Time*, where Being appears as a destiny, a communal fate, a mystical element of historicity that grounds a joint mission. According to Nancy, the community itself appears as a goal and therefore has no goal; its mode is becoming and coming to sense; we are always already together, so we can only create sense in community. Nancy contrasts goal-oriented communities, which follow a logic of destination, with an essential but often overlooked neologism of Derrida's – *destinerrance*, which can be loosely translated as a wandering (or straying) of destination. This term was invented by Derrida in a de-

bate with Lacan (published in *La carte postale*), where, in contrast to Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of communication, he writes that the goal of projected transmission can easily be missed, communication is thus characterized by the structure of failure – 'the letter does not always arrive at its destination, and since this belongs to its structure, it can be said that it never really arrives there and that when it arrives its possibility-not-arriving torments it with an internal divergence' (Derrida 1979, 517). Destinnerrance sets up the possibility for the community to veer off course, miss the mark, and never reach it. The community must be a community of failure since its destination is (and has to be) constantly changing.

The idea of a happy and peaceful community is a classic projection work. The extent of this projection is perhaps best exemplified by Levi-Strauss, who, in the spirit of Rousseau, praises the extremely aggressive traditional Amazonian community of the Nambikwara for how pure and uncorrupted it is, even illustrating this by saying that 'it has not yet been corrupted by writing' (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1961, 289 ff.). Here, we see what Derrida was talking about when he claimed that tradition's relation to writing is a kind of revelatory symptom of the entire Western metaphysical construction as a logocentric prejudice. In its most widespread form today, this manifests as a desire to return to that which is supposed to have been lost, but of course, this pure originality never existed – in the beginning, there was a difference; the origin is always already divided, the contamination is not after the fact but at work from the beginning.

The community as its threat

We can easily understand why Derrida himself, in his own words, hesitated to use the term 'community.' He was bothered by the word itself, which he 'never liked very much since it carries connotations of participation and even of fusion and identification' in

which he recognized ‘more threats than promises’ (Derrida 1995, 46). He explains at greater length that he also disliked the word because of its sound, for in French, the word for community (*commun*) sounds the same as the expression for ‘like one’ (*comme-un*). Derrida’s first emphasis on the theme of community is that it is a self-deconstructive, unstable entity, always already in the process of disintegration. Its logic is best described by the term Derrida introduces in his late publications, most of which appeared in the last decade of his life and are devoted primarily to the theme of sovereignty – community, according to Derrida, is *autoimmune*. There is always the germ of decay in the community, so it is threatened not only by outsiders but by its foreignness, which is always already at work. This is why Derrida calls it, probably with a word more appropriate for him, ‘*auto-co-immunité*,’ autocoimmunity. (Derrida, 2003, 59)

‘Auto-immunitary haunts the community and its system of immunitary survival like the hyperbole of its own possibility. Nothing in common, nothing immune, safe and sound, *heilig* and holy, nothing unscathed in the most autonomous living present without a risk of auto-immunity’ (Derrida 2002, 82). This is the state of the community, of the ever-decomposing organism, that seeks to immunize itself, above all, against the outside that threatens it and founds its identity. At the same time, it is attacked by its immune system. We must try to accept that the community in its origins is destined to decay as something that does not necessarily mean the end of the community but rather opens the possibility for its future.

In other words, the community is structured as impossible, its existence is impossible, and the conditions that establish it are, at the same time, the source of its decomposition. However, this is not necessarily an end for the community. The fact that community is structured as impossibility means that it can carry sense or that it is sense since sense is also structured as impossible, and

it can never be possessed or grasped in the scheme of presence. Therefore, the sense always remains before us, just as the community is always a task to be accomplished. In any case, we must insist that lack is a constitutive fact and that the community must remain incomplete; all other attempts, i.e., fusion, association, and other forms of union, transform the community into something else or dissolve it. The community must always remain open and incomplete – in this sense, let us consider two proposals for such a non-absolute, open community.

Community of question and allegorical community

The first is despite his objections to the concept of community offered by Derrida himself in his early work on the philosophy of Levinas entitled *Violence and Metaphysics* (first published in 1963), where he speaks of a particular community that bears some accents of what we want to emphasize here. It is not a community of fullness or presence, but the opposite: community of absence and lack of knowledge. Derrida calls it the ‘community of the question’ or ‘community of questioning,’ a community marked by philosophy as the asking of questions. In this context, Nancy says later that philosophy is an exposure to sense. In the background we can undoubtedly recognize Heidegger’s famous saying that concludes *The Question Concerning Technology*, which states that the ‘questioning is the piety of thought’ (Heidegger 1977, 35), and questioning is the respect for the world around us. Derrida, then, imagines a pious community of philosophical questioning that comes on the scene after the death of community and philosophy.

A community of decision, of initiative, of absolute initiality, but also a threatened community, in which the question has not yet found the language it has decided to seek, is not yet sure of its

own possibility within the community. A community of the question about the possibility of the question. This is very little—almost nothing—but within it, today, is sheltered and encapsulated an unbreachable dignity and duty of decision. An unbreachable responsibility. Why unbreachable? Because the impossible has already occurred. The impossible according to the totality of what is questioned, according to the totality of beings, objects, and determinations, the impossible according to the history of facts, has occurred: there is a history of the question, a pure memory of the pure question which in its possibility perhaps authorizes all inheritance and all pure memory in general and as such. The question has already begun—we know it has—and this strange certainty about an other absolute origin, an other absolute decision that has secured the past of the question, liberates an incomparable instruction: the discipline of the question. Through (through, that is to say that we must already know how to read) this discipline, which is not yet even the inconceivable tradition of the negative (of negative determination), and which is completely previous to irony, to maieutics, to epoché, and to doubt, an injunction is announced: the question must be maintained. (Derrida 2001, 98–99)

This view can be complemented by Derrida's reflections on the university and the right to philosophy, where he calls for a 'community of thought,' a responsible community that 'questions the essence and principles of reason [...], thereby also questioning what community and institution mean' (Derrida 2004, 148). Every thought is in some way already a thought of community and, at the same time, a thought about community, and it does not even have to be completely sane; the community also contains unreasonable elements. In the same work, Derrida

elaborates on this theme and says that a community of thought must also include *polemos* – an element of discord that is traditionally perceived as destructive of community (ibid., 169). The community is usually understood as a common mind, but we naturally forget the aspect of unreason, of madness. This element destroys the ideal schema of community. ‘Let us suppose that everyone has his private madness. Knowledge without truth would be the labor or the attention to an intense singularity analogous to this ‘private’ madness – for everything private is madness to the extent, at least, that we seek, through it, to communicate it,’ wrote Maurice Blanchot (1995, 44). He brings up a crucial question of communicating madness, which corresponds to the excessive nature of the question. For Blanchot, the questioning community will manifest itself as openness to the unforeseeability of a call, the coming otherness that shakes our established schemata. Its mode of existence is openness to arrival and, thus, of course, to exposure (Nancy refers to this condition in the context of corporeality as *ex-peau-sition*). The threat is always present, and the monster’s arrival is on the horizon. This is the essential condition, ‘the community lives and feeds on this vulnerability; it must be so’ (Derrida 1995, 23). To be exposed is to be alive; this exposure is not just a relationship to the external environment; the law of autoimmunity determines everything that exists.

So, the truth of the community can never be possessed; it is always conceived as a secret (that there is no secret, as Derrida would say). The community can only be a community of unknowing and questioning. Its movement is a constant oscillation between outside and inside; each time it comes close to possessing the secret, it encounters a trace of its otherness and outsideness. The foundation of the community is thus outside; it can never be included,

and it represents its edge and end. This is the case not only when it is formalized as negation in death but also every time it takes the form of absolute knowledge or absolute presence.

Community of writing or community without end

Twenty years after Derrida conceives a community of question, Nancy and Blanchot, in their debate, emphasize the ‘community of writing’ and the ‘literary community’; Nancy (who even speaks of ‘literary communism’ in this context) says that ‘under the idea of ‘writing’ he tries to think of a movement of saying that transcends all sense.’ For Nancy, the reference to writing and textuality is primarily a formulation of absent sense. The writing announces the end of the age of the book (as proclaimed in the title of the essential introductory chapter of Derrida’s magnum opus *Of Grammatology*) and thus presupposes an absence that entails the ‘death of the father of logos’ and replaces the void created by that death. Presence in writing is formulated only as a sign of a sign, a trace of a trace, and a trace of the erasure of a trace, an endless game of signifiers that never leads to a transcendental signified. Traditional communities were communities of the book, and after the end of this epoch, the only possible point around which a community can gather is absence. With its materiality, writing appears as the exterior of being and its self-effacement as absolute uncontrollability, as relation to the other and otherness. Signification is thus characterized by absolute singularity, and signification, in general, does not exist; there is no general ‘making of sense.’ Signification or signification is an individual event; as such, it can represent the making of sense. “‘Writing’ in the modern sense denotes the event of sense and sense as an event,’ says Nancy (1995, 30). The sense as such is transferred from one being to another in address; indeed, it is a sharing that does not take away from what is shared. The

sense that is communicated must make sense to someone. Otherwise, it does not create a bond. Otherwise, this communication is just the mere transmission of information. Sense cannot exist in isolation at all; it is always already shared. Sense is communicable and shareable, but it is not the transmission of information – in this case, it would be better to speak of meaning (for Nancy, meaning, unlike sense, is a matter of signification, of marking, it is something that happens in language, the union of signifier and signified – sense, on the other hand, can happen beyond language, when something is communicated and thereby becomes shared and common, e.g., a smile). Literature says that we are sense – but this saying has no content (as opposed to meaning), but rather the opposite; it communicates non-content: the word sense ‘does not contain that something is signified; rather, it contains the difficulty of speaking. The communication of sense, or the sense of sense, its sense as that which binds, can only be communicated as a concern and a problem.’ (Nancy 1995, 31) Sense, then, is sharing; as such, it is ‘simply here, like the world. Sense is found in an indefinite multiplicity of origins and in their coexistence’ (Devisch 2013, 94). Nancy thus describes the community as the double bind of sharing and being shared that best characterizes the community of writing.

Writing characterizes a community that is the exaltation of the undivided, as Blanchot says: ‘Inasmuch as the community on behalf of everyone rules (for me and for itself) over a beside oneself (its absence) that is its fate, it gives rise to an unshared though necessarily multiple speech in a way that does not let it develop itself in words: always already lost, it has no use, creates no work and does not glorify itself in that loss.’ (Blanchot 1988, 12) To speak of loss might be problematic at this point, for such discourse always serves a kind of return, in this case, the return of something that never entirely existed and existed only as a phantom. Commu-

nication marks the point of community failure since community communicates nothing, produces nothing, and has no use. This failure, Blanchot argues, ‘associates the community with a certain type of writing, a writing that has no choice but to look for the last words of hospitality to what we cannot expect.’ (ibid.) Thus, the community of writing is directed toward the future; its source and foundation are always there, not as destiny, telos, end, goal, or destination, but as *destinerrance*.

Community without community is to come. In the sense that it is always coming, endlessly, at the heart of every collectivity (because it never stops coming, it ceaselessly resists collectivity itself as much as it resists the individual). It is no more than this: to come to the limit of compearance, to that limit to which we are in effect convoked, called, and sent. The call that convokes us, as well as the one we address to one another at this limit (this call from one to the other is no doubt the same call, and yet not the same) can be named for want of a better term, writing, or literature. (Nancy 1991, 71)

Hence, the community is always in the making, which can only be articulated in writing and erasing. Since we live in the literal world, where the absent foundations of sense appear spectrally through textuality, after the end of the epoch of the book, the task of reading and translating, and thus of coming together in a community, is the only possibility of sense, seems to be even more critical.

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