

Cultural Memory in the Present

COMMUNITAS

THE ORIGIN AND DESTINY OF COMMUNITY



Roberto Esposito

Translated by Timothy Campbell

"Esposito is an expansive thinker, unusually attuned to the historical as well as the philosophical dimensions of that hybrid field called 'political theory.' This important and attractive translation brings to political theorists working in English Esposito's skill at speaking across the division between the analytic and continental traditions."

—KIRSTIE MCCLURE, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

"With *Communitas*, Esposito has made an enormous contribution to the cardinal and complex notion of community, taking issue with the essentializing view of community that remains inherent in the language of contemporary philosophy. The reader feels guided through debates of great complexity by a generous expert who knows not only the major arguments, but the minor caveats and inconsistencies as well."

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"With his usual erudition and philosophical precision, Roberto Esposito traces the development of the concept of community and its limits through the European tradition. His argument poses a challenge for anyone who wants to think community today."

—MICHAEL HARDT, DUKE UNIVERSITY

No theme has been more central to international philosophical debates than that of community: from American communitarianism to Habermas's ethic of communication to the French deconstruction of community in the work of Derrida and Nancy. Nevertheless, in none of these cases has the concept been examined from the perspective of community's original etymological meaning: *cum munus*. In *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, Roberto Esposito does just that through an original counter-history of political philosophy that takes up not only readings of community by Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, Heidegger, and Bataille, but also by Hölderlin, Nietzsche, Canetti, Arendt, and Sartre. The result of his extraordinary conceptual and lexical analysis is a radical overturning of contemporary interpretations of community. Community isn't a property, nor is it a territory to be separated and defended against those who do not belong to it. Rather, it is a void, a debt, a gift to the other that also reminds us of our constitutive alterity with respect to ourselves.

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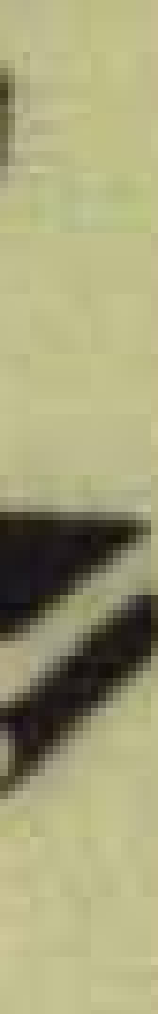
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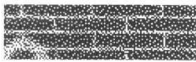


Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries, Editors

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Introduction: Nothing in Common

Nothing seems more appropriate today than thinking community; nothing more necessary, demanded, and heralded by a situation that joins in a unique epochal knot the failure of all communisms with the misery of new individualisms.¹ Nevertheless, nothing is further from view; nothing so remote, repressed, and put off until later, to a distant and indecipherable horizon. It isn't that the philosophies expressly addressed to thinking community were or are lacking. On the contrary, they tend to constitute one of the most dominant themes debated internationally.² Yet not only do they remain well within this unthinkability of community but they constitute its most symptomatic expression. There is something else as well that goes beyond the specific modalities in question (communal, communitarian, communicative) that contemporary political philosophy adopts now and again and that concerns instead community's very form: the community isn't translatable into a political-philosophical lexicon except by completely distorting (or indeed perverting) it, as we saw occur so tragically in the last century. This appears to contradict the tendency of a certain kind of political philosophy to see in the question of community its very same object. It is this reduction to "object" of a political-philosophical discourse that forces community into a conceptual language that radically alters it, while at the same time attempts to name it: that of the individual *and* totality; of identity *and* the particular; of the origin *and* the end; or more simply of the *subject* with its most unassailable metaphysical connotations of unity, absoluteness, and interiority.³ It isn't by chance that

beginning from similar assumptions, political philosophy tends to think community as a “wider subjectivity”; as, and this in spite of the presupposed opposition to the individualist paradigm, such a large part of neo-communitarian philosophy ends up doing, when it swells the self in the hypertrophic figure of “the unity of unities.”⁴ This also occurs in those cultures of intersubjectivity always intent on finding otherness in an alter ego similar in everything to the *ipse* that they would like to challenge and that instead they reproduce.

The truth is that these conceptions are united by the ignored assumption that community is a “property” belonging to subjects that join them together [*accomuna*]: an attribute, a definition, a predicate that qualifies them as belonging to the same totality [*insieme*], or as a “substance” that is produced by their union. In each case community is conceived of as a quality that is added to their nature as subjects, making them *also* subjects of community. *More* subjects, subjects of a larger entity, one that is senior or even better than simple individual identity, but from which it originates and in the end reflects. Despite the obvious historical, conceptual, and lexical differences, from this perspective the organicistic sociology of *Gemeinschaft*, American neo-communitarianism, and the various ethics of communication (and the communist tradition as well, despite quite a different categorical profile) lie beyond the same line that keeps them within the unthinkable of community. For all these philosophies, in fact, it is a “fullness” or a “whole” (the originary meaning of the lemma *teuta* is fitting then, which in different Indo-European dialects means “swollen,” “potent,” and therefore the “fullness” of the social body insofar as it is *ethnos*, *Volk*, people).⁵ It is also, using a seemingly different terminology, a good, a value, an essence, which depending on the case in question, can be lost and then refound as something that once belonged to us and that therefore can once again belong to us; an origin to be mourned or a destiny foreshadowed based on the perfect symmetry that links *arche* and *telos*. In each case, community is what is most properly our “own” [*il nostro più proprio*]. Whether it needs to appropriate what is common to us (for communisms and communitarianisms) or to communicate what is most properly our own (for the ethics of communication), what is produced doesn’t change. The community remains doubly tied to the semantics of *proprium*. On this score, it isn’t necessary to touch on the post-Romantic mannerism of

Ferdinand Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft*, which differs from *Gesellschaft* on the basis of the originary appropriation of its own proper essence. It's enough to recall in this regard Max Weber's most secularized community in order to find highlighted, albeit in a denaturalized form, the very same figure of belonging: "The *communalization* of social relationships occurs if and insofar as the orientation of social behavior—whether in the individual case, on the average or in the idea type—is based on a sense of solidarity: the result of emotional or traditional attachments of participants."⁶ That this possession might refer above all to territory doesn't change things at all,⁷ since territory is defined by the category of "appropriation," as the originary matrix of every other property that follows.⁸ If we linger a little and reflect on community without invoking contemporary models, the most paradoxical aspect of the question is that the "common" is defined exactly through its most obvious antonym: what is common is that which unites the ethnic, territorial, and spiritual property of every one of its members. They have in common what is most properly their own; they are the owners of what is common to them all.

My first intention in this work lies in distancing myself from this dialectic. Yet if, as we say, this dialectic constitutively inheres in the conceptual language of modern political philosophy, the only way to escape from it resides in locating a point of departure, a hermeneutic support, that is both outside and autonomous with respect to such a dialectic. I've searched for this point, in a manner of speaking, within the origin of the very thing itself under investigation, in the etymology of the Latin term *communitas*. In order to do so, I had to proceed along a path that was anything but easy, one that moves across lexical traps and difficulties in interpretation, but that can lead to a notion of community that is radically different from those that have been dealt with up to now.

Indeed, as dictionaries show, the first meaning of the noun *communitas* and of its corresponding adjective, *communis*, is what becomes meaningful from the opposition to what is proper. In all neo-Latin languages (though not only), "common" (*commun*, *comun*, *kommun*) is what is *not* proper [*proprio*], that begins where what is proper ends: *Quod commune cum alio est desinit esse proprium*.⁹ It is what belongs to more than one, to many or to everyone, and therefore is that which is "public" in opposition to "private" or "general" (though also "collective") in contrast to "individual"

[*particolare*]. In addition to this first canonical meaning, which is already traceable to the Greek *koinos* (and also translated in the Gothic *gemein* and its derivatives *Gemeinde*, *Gemeinschaft*, *Vergemeinschaftung*), there is still another meaning to be added, one, however, less obvious because it transfers properly within itself the larger semantic complexity of the term from which it originates: *munus* (its archaic form is *moinus*, *moenus*), which is composed of the root *mei-* and the suffix *-nes*, both of which have a social connotation.¹⁰ This term, in fact, oscillates in turn among three meanings that aren't at all the same and that seem to make it miss its mark, or at least to limit the emphasis, the initial juxtaposition of "public/private"—*munus dicitur tum de privatis, tum de publicis*—in favor of another conceptual area that is completely traceable to the idea of "obligation" [*dovere*].¹¹ These are *onus*, *officium*, and *donum*.¹² In truth, for the first two the meaning of duty [*dovere*] is immediately clear: obligation, office, official, position [*impiego*], and post. The third appears, however, to be more problematic. In what sense would a gift [*dono*] be a duty? Doesn't there appear, on the contrary, something spontaneous and therefore eminently voluntary in the notion of gift?

Yet the specificity of the gift expressed in the word *munus* with respect to the more general use of *donum* has the effect of reducing the initial distance and of realigning this meaning with the semantics of duty. The *munus* in fact is to *donum* as "species is to genus,"¹³ because, yes, it means "gift," but a particular gift, "distinguished by its obligatory character, implied by its root *mei-*, which denotes exchange."¹⁴ With respect to the circular relation between gift and exchange, one can't help referring to Emile Benveniste's well-known studies and, even earlier, to Marcel Mauss's famous essay on the relationship.¹⁵ But let's stay for a moment longer with the element of being obliged [*doverosità*]: once someone has accepted the *munus*, an obligation (*onus*) has been created to exchange it either in terms of goods or service [*servizio*]. Once again the superimposition between "gift" and "office" comes into view, which in addition are distinctly joined in the expression *munere fungi*.¹⁶ It's true that Benveniste, following Mauss's lead, traces the necessity of the exchange, of the "counter-gift," even before in the root *do-* and therefore in the derivatives *doron*, *dorea*, and *dosis*; from there we find the doubly crossed direction of "give" [*dare*] and "take" [*prendere*], "to take (to give) to" [in English.—Trans.],