Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community.


What is most proper to community is the ‘improper’: its impropriety. A wound, an original deficiency which divests community of any predetermined substance, of the very possibility to attach a positive definition to it. Community’s essence lies in the vortex where its members’ autonomy is sucked down and exposed to the loss of boundaries, the explosion of subjective self-determinations. Upon this insight - the fil rouge of Communitas, possibly its most compelling contribution - Esposito builds a rigorous reinterpretation of the modern philosophies of community, of how their different, if antithetical, ramifications have been able to look into the eyes of the abyss which community is: a genealogical foray into the folds and creases of a thought which for the most part has either torn down (as in Hobbes) or covered up (as in Rousseau) the unbearable nothingness of community; simultaneously, a search for the intellectual ground (Kant, but above all Heidegger and Bataille) upon which an ‘unoriginal’ community could find its roots anew.

The ‘originally improper’ - the primordial - meaning of community is explored by means of a persuasive philosophical-etymological inquiry into the Latin term communitas: cum-munus, ‘with duty’, where duty does not simply refer to an obligation, but to a special kind of gift “that one cannot keep for oneself and over which, therefore, one is not completely master” (p. 5). It is in this sense that community is essentially constituted by a lack, the sharing of a lack which can in no way amount to “the subject’s expansion or multiplication,” but only to exposure, expropriation, “a spasm in the continuity of the subject” (p. 6). Yet, to what extent has the Western tradition been able – philosophically - to bear the wounds that communitas necessarily inflicts?

A detailed account of the multiple trajectories and oscillations which have informed the political-philosophical parabola of modernity is out of the scope of this article, and in no way could it do justice to the complexity of Esposito’s patient hermeneutical inquiry. I leave to the reader the task of assessing the cogency of the arguments that each chapter puts forward in relation to each of the five above-mentioned thinkers (Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, Heidegger and Bataille) and the prevailing ‘emotion’ through which each of them have thought of community (respectively fear, guilt, law, ecstasy, experience). I would like to limit the following to a few remarks on what, according to Esposito, constitutes the enduring legacy of modern communitarianism - two moments which have been, by necessity, tightly interwoven: nihilism and subjectivism.

It is Hobbes who would inaugurate the path leading to the ‘immunization’ of communitas: the vertical relation established between the sovereign and his subjects results in the latter being “artificially united in their subtraction from community” (p.27). If community is lack, lack of origin – the originary nothing – the Hobbesian dispositif can be said to work only through the pre-emptive suppression of the threat of annihilation that such lack carries within itself. Here - Esposito suggests - in this ‘nothing squared’, lie the roots of modern nihilism. The rise of the monad subject of modernity follows suit: “Subjects of such sovereign are those that have nothing in common since everything is divided between ‘mine’ and ‘yours’: division without sharing” (p. 28). Starting with Rousseau, the various attempts made by modern communitarianism to reverse such dialectic and restore the myth of an originary community, will yet fall into the same trap. The archetype of a “presupposed identity of everyone with everyone else and all with every one” (p. 52) does indeed not only entail the exclusion of the ‘other’ (and therefore of the impropriety of the subject), but also seeks to fill, thus negating, the original void which constitutes the munus.

But Communitas is not solely, nor chiefly, an enquiry into the distortions of modern political thought, so often divided between the lure of identity politics and the trap of subjectivistic atomization (a false duality, as Esposito points out and political practice confirms through its daily to and fro movement between these two poles). Communitas is above all an incisive attempt to resist such sclerosis and, in this sense, it takes its rightful place among the most prominent contemporary thinkers of community with whom it is in dialogue (Agamben [1993], Nancy [1991], Blanchot [1988]). Esposito’s reading of Kant, but above all Heidegger and Bataille, is indeed to be interpreted as a quest for a way out of the
nihilistic bias of political modernity: it is in the specular, and somehow converse, anti-humanistic vein of the two latter thinkers that the nothing-in-common was first conceptualized and it is thus from here, from the outer limit of Western metaphysics, that community needs to be rethought. In Bataille’s words, “[c]ommunication cannot proceed from one full and intact individual to another. It requires individuals whose separate existence in themselves is risked, placed at the limit of death and nothingness” (p.145-6).

Those - especially English-speaking readers - familiar with Esposito’s later research (and, in particular with Bios, Esposito [2008]) will find this work particularly valuable for laying out the ontological ground upon which his account of immunity and biopolitics was subsequently worked out. The category of ‘immunitas’, in fact, is nothing but the antinomic reversal of that of ‘com-munitas’, it spelling out the contrary thrust which frees individuals from the munus that originally binds them together. Biopolitics, accordingly, will mainly be characterized as the annihilation of the foundations of community: sacrificing life in order to protect it. Mainly, but not only. The envisioned possibility of modernity’s immunitarian dispositif turning over into an ‘affirmative biopolitics’ constituted, arguably, one of the most provocative insights of Bios. In the very last pages of Communitas it is to be found, in an embryonic form, an analogous argument. The acceleration of nihilism that has taken place over the last few decades in Western societies, and the consequent “loss of mastery over the complex meaning of experience” might represent the turning point towards the fulfilment of the improperness of community, consisting in nothing but “the singular and plural characteristic of an existence free from every meaning that is presumed, imposed or postponed” (p. 149). Here, the reader will probably find himself caught between the pincers of an ingenuous hopefulness and the earnestness of a thinking projected into our common political destiny.

References


