

Roberto Esposito

Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community.

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The translation of Roberto Esposito's works, starting with *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* in 2008, is a welcome arrival to the English speaking world, where Italian political theory has been growing in importance. Both Antonio Negri and Giorgio Agamben have made fundamental contributions in pushing forward Michel Foucault's analysis of biopolitics. However, in *Bios*, Esposito seeks a *via media* between Negri's affirmative biopolitics and Agamben's ontological conflation of biopolitics with a sovereign's capacity to kill. For Esposito, the story of how political action and thought became centered on the capacity to produce healthy lives, and correspondingly to take them, is more thought provoking than either Negri or Agamben (or for that matter Foucault) ultimately show. Esposito deploys a concept of immunity to characterize the essence of biopolitics: 'immunity is the power to preserve life' (*Bios*, 46). As a result, the oscillation between an affirmative biopolitics (Negri) and a negative or lethal thanatopolitics (Agamben) hinges on the continuous need to deploy immunitarian strategies of protection and preservation.

The importance of Esposito's discussion of immunity as the intrinsic link that sustains a politics of both the preservation and the taking of life is that it involves a reproblematicization of a notion of community. One of the central questions running through *Bios* and, of course, *Communitas*, concerns the possibility of an affirmative community that does not fall into the trap of constantly attempting to immunize itself from inside or outside contagions. Whereas in *Bios* (the second of three volumes on this question), Esposito sought to justify a biopolitics of multiplicity, in *Communitas* (the first volume) he originally develops the specifically modern philosophical trajectory of this relation between community and immunity.

What, then, is a community? Rather than thinking of it (like many commentators) in terms of a 'wider subjectivity' and its conflation with individuality (what ultimately binds a community) (2), Esposito advances an etymological argument to show that community—in essence, *cum* (with) *munus* (obligation)—represents the possibility of an obligation to an other that binds in an important way. This obligation, however, is not one that is reducible to a form of property or limited by predefined ideological specifications; rather, it constitutes itself through a lack in fulfilling this original obligation as such and through the continuous need of the receiver to respond to such an obligation. In other words, Esposito's etymology of the Latin *munus* shows that an original community is one where its subjects 'are united by an "obligation," in the sense that we say "I owe you

something,” but not “you owe *me* something” (5, emphasis in original). The implication is that this intrinsic lack or debt that percolates between individuals can never fully be met; it always demands a perpetual reciprocity and exchange that in fact problematizes a notion of subjectivity as a self-contained essence removed from the ‘other’. Community, as Esposito theorizes it with respect to its intrinsic *munus* or obligation, thus involves a fundamental loss of boundaries among its members: ‘That which everyone fear in the *munus*, which is both “hospitable” and “hostile,” according to the troubling lexical proximity of *hospes-hostis*, is the violent loss of borders, which awarding identity to him, ensures his subsistence’ (8). But it is this substantial lack, this gravitational effect without an object as such, the very Janus-faced possibility of hostility and hospitality, that constitutes the ‘unreachable’ origin of what binds a community. As Esposito writes,

All of the stories that tell of the founding crime, the collective crime, the ritual assassination, the sacrificial victim featured in the history of civilization don’t do anything else except evoke metaphorically the *delinquere* that keeps us together, in the technical sense of ‘to lack’ and ‘to be wanting’; the breach, the trauma, the lacuna out of which we originate. Not the origin but its absence, its withdrawal. It is the original *munus* that constitutes us and makes us destitute in our moral finiteness (8).

Esposito then proceeds with a ‘communitarian genealogy’ of the modern Western philosophical tradition by subtly demonstrating how this origin and its lack are grappled with. Each chapter deals with a specific philosopher, starting with Hobbes, then Rousseau, Kant, Heidegger and Bataille. With the exception of Kant, each of these philosophers is associated with a specific concept that defines an emotional disposition towards this originary lack with respect to community. Esposito’s discussion is invariably dense, rich and subtle, and I cannot hope to do justice to the nuances of his readings of these thinkers. Briefly, then, in his discussion of Hobbes, Esposito argues that Hobbes sets the stage for a socio-political grammar of community by reducing its actualization to the possibility of a fear of violent death implicit in the assumption of human equality. This capacity to kill is the only marker that binds individuals together. What Hobbes offers, then, is not an expiation of that fear but rather its centralization, such that what ultimately constitutes the community is its complete sublimation by the immunization of all members from each other: ‘only by dissociating themselves from any relation can individuals avoid lethal contact’ (27).

With Rousseau, the predominant emotion is no longer fear, but rather guilt. Rousseau is enormously important for communitarian political thought, and of interest for Esposito is precisely Rousseau’s attempt to reconstitute a mythological origin of community. Nonetheless, Esposito argues that Rousseau fails in this endeavor because of the aporetic attempt to merge a self-contained solitary individual in the state of nature with an other at the moment when the temporality of society arises from its mythological origin (51). Nonetheless, Esposito goes so far as to claim that Rousseau’s conflation of

individuality with totality is a form of philosophical totalitarianism, because '[t]here is no distance, discontinuity, or difference with regard to another that is no longer other, because the other too is an integral part of the one. Indeed, it is already the one that loses itself (and finds itself) in its own *proper* alterity' (53). Though building on Rousseau's position on an original community, Kant establishes instead the paradigm of law that would become deeply influential for subsequent theorizations of community. What is central for Esposito is Kant's categorical imperative, the command to obey the transcendental and universal law, that is central for the thinking of community beyond notions of subjectivity. Kant, however, emerges as a seque for an important discussion of Heidegger and Bataille in order to fundamentally challenge the Hobbesian formulation of community or the dead end of political modernity (15).

Esposito reads Heidegger as an anti-political philosopher (92), one who attempted to think the relationship between others (*mit-dasein*) not through an original positive subjectivity. Rather, 'Heidegger refers to the originally singular and plural character of a shared existence, which is properly called ecstatic.... For Heidegger this means beginning not with "me" or with "not-me," but with *cum*... we are together with others...in that of always being the-ones-with-the-others and the-ones-of-the-others' (94). Even if Heidegger, the philosopher par excellence of human finitude, led the way towards reconceptualizing a notion of 'with' beyond the confines of modernity's political grammar of community as belonging, the true hero of *Communitas* is perhaps Bataille. For it is he who is ultimately able to reconceptualize an anti-humanistic/anti-Hobbesian (nihilistic) notion of community on the basis of 'a contagion caused by the breakdown of individual borders and the mutual infection of wounds' (124).

This idea of infection of wounds is precisely the complete opposite of any form of immunitarian paradigm that characterized much of modern biopolitical practice at a global level. For Bataille community is rooted in the excessive and abyss-like death of the individual. As Esposito argues, 'for Bataille the *cum* constitutes the limit beyond which one cannot have an experience without losing oneself' (121-2). This limit of losing oneself then only occurs through an impossibility: 'What places me outside myself, in common with others, is rather the death of the other, not because one can experience that more than one's own but exactly for the opposite reason: because it isn't possible' (122-3). Thus Esposito follows in the footsteps of Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, and perhaps Agamben, in rethinking community on a communicability of shared nothingness, of opening the subject into a 'community of death' (127). The turn to Bataille is perhaps not unproblematic, given his penchant for sadistic pleasures of the flesh; and what bearing this may have on Bataille's overall thought on community is not addressed by Esposito.

Readers will undoubtedly wonder whether the destiny of Western modernity can ultimately become unhinged from its ever-present nihilism, what Esposito calls 'the lack of a lack' (146). Indeed, in a sense Esposito's intervention on rethinking community is itself an attempt at redeeming, immanently, Western thought. But is this sufficient to

combat a truly global biopolitical *dispositif* that takes life as much as it protects it? Or do we not need to think our common destiny, a common global community, beyond a Western philosophical discourse?

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