Rethinking Community in the Global Age

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Abstract: The re-emergence of a diffuse need for community in the context of the global age compels us to rethink the concept of “community” in the light of the changes and transformations that are unfolding today. The community cannot be considered as a residual phenomenon of resistance to the processes of modernization, but must be recognized as a new phenomenon which accompanies the processes of globalization. The following contribution investigates the fundamental sources of the need for community in the world today, and identifies principally two: 1) community as a response to the pathologies of individualism (insecurity, loss of meaning, atomism, loss of solidarity); 2) community as a response to the dynamics of exclusion that affect societies that are ever more multicultural in character. Also if community largely tends today to assume pathological forms that harbour the potential for conflict and violence, the need for community is legitimate insofar as it expresses a need for belonging and solidarity, a need for the affirmation of identities and a demand for recognition. In my view, the global era offers the bases for sharing in this sense insofar as it gives rise to the idea of the community of the human kind, a community united by interdependence of processes and events, brought together by its shared vulnerability in the face of the new risks and challenges that are produced by globalization.

1.

The concept of “community,” long the focus of critical attention in contemporary reflection, where the crisis of social bonds and the solidarity deficit pervading modern democratic societies is deplored, should in my view be reconsidered in the light of the radical transformations it is undergoing in the global age.¹

I would argue that such an aim is particularly crucial today, in a context which, as some interpreters of globalization have pointed out, is characterized by a renewed and widely felt “need for community,” a need that cannot be ignored. Moreover, I believe we would be seriously mistaken, as we will see, if such a need were considered as little better than a bothersome and illiberal archaic residue.

Rather, it is a matter of deciphering the reasons and the motives that lie behind this need, in order to devise adequate answers in the normative perspective.

Drawing on the terminology of Marcel Mauss, one might say that globalization appears as a “total social fact” (fait social total) involving not so much a single sphere (e.g. the economic sphere) but the entire social structure. It thus encompasses the economic, political, cultural, anthropological, and ecological dimensions. At the same time, however, it can be seen as a non-homogeneous, ambivalent process: for while on the one hand there are “global” processes of unification, homogenization, standardization, on the other, one also finds “local” phenomena of fragmentation and differentiation. In this regard, the concept of “glocalization” introduced by R. Robertson offers an insightful and effective approach.

Glocalization implies a twofold phenomenon. One well-known aspect is the rise of a global market that pays little heed to territorial boundaries, together with the emergence of a network society unified and standardized by the expansion of informational and mass-media technologies. Hand in hand with this aspect comes the conformity and cultural leveling caused by the “MacDonaldization” of the world. Yet at the same time the world appears to be “fragmented,” according to the definition provided by Clifford Geertz, increasingly driven by divisions and differences, the most evident symptom of which is the emergence of “local” realities that could be called community areas. These, independently of the matrix they are inspired by (see below), express a desire for cohesion and re-territorialization, for identity and belonging as well as for re-shaping of boundaries within a prevailing culture of undifferentiation and global cutting across frontiers.

The thesis of “glocalization” thus rightly seeks to overcome the opposition-based and dichotomic vision of the global/local nexus by insisting on the reciprocal entailment – or co-belonging, as it has been suggested – of two opposite and complementary situations.

This means that the rise of community should not be considered as an archaic and pre-modern residue running counter to the development of a global society, but as a new product of globalization. Accordingly, community

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and the “local” must be reconsidered from a fresh perspective, not as *resisting* residues but as something *co-existing* with the global dimension, creating a complex and multifaceted setting.

A first problem arises, however, when one investigates the *matrices of the need for community*. Manifold and varied as they clearly are, they preclude any conception of putting on the same level Emergency activists and an association of citizens for the protection of law and order, Chechen terrorists and the Afghan community of “women in black,” the volunteers of the “Lilliput” network and the members of a religious sect, to name but a few.

Furthermore, the fact that these groupings can be ascribed to the concept of community reveals the undefined, obscure, and often amorphous character of the very concept itself, which can be adapted to an unlimited number of occasions with different values, aims, and needs.

Therefore let us try taking a step backward with a return to the classical definition of community in order to assess its real effectiveness and plausibility.

1.1

Building on the Tönniesian distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, we may say that “community” is a form of socialization within which individuals, on the grounds of kinship ties, the same ethnic or religious belonging, local proximity as well as shared values, partake in a form of cohesion rooted in solidarity and affection. In contrast, “society” indicates a form of socialization where relations between individuals are mediated by contracts and essentially governed by instrumentality in order to obtain mutual maximization of individual interests.7

Now, the main problem derives from the fact that this definition has long been conceived in a *purely contrastive and evolutionary perspective* (for which Tönnies himself can be held only partly responsible!). In other words, community has been, and still is, conceived as *Gemeinschaft*, i.e. a holistic structure and pre-modern residue founded on natural and ascribed ties, which is destined to disappear and be “outstripped,” so to speak, by the modern *Gesellschaft* based on individual free choice springing from the assertion of rights and the pursuit of interests.

This contrast has downgraded the idea of community to a useless and even dangerous archaism, further aggravated by its ideological resurgence in totalitarian regimes of the 20th century (suffice it to think of the myths of

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Blut und Boden that formed the backcloth to the building of Volksgemeinschaft in the 1930s).

Such a state of affairs prevented a different idea of community and of the community/society nexus from coming to the fore. In my view (and this is my basic argument) community and society are to be regarded as two different modes of social relationship, as “ideal types” which coexist (and, as we will see, must coexist) even after the disappearance of pre-modern Gemeinschaft, since both are needed for the proper working of societies as well as modern democracies.

The very expression “return to community,” nowadays so widespread, is therefore deceptive because it comprises a sort of suspicion towards community which biases any possible reformulation.

Community regarded as the constitutive dimension of social structure – a vision that endows us with the tools to understand the new forms it is taking on in the global age – is by no means absent from classical sociology. One need only reflect on Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel, who analyzed the definitive transition from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft but, at the same time, placed emphasis on the persistence of the need for community, which translates into new forms of social co-operation and solidarity. For their part, such forms attest to the need to view society not as a mere sum of atomized individuals linked only by either the impersonal dynamics of economic exchange or legal relations, but as a group of individuals sharing emotions, values and aims.

Most of all, however, within the panoply of the classical figures of sociology, thought turns to John Dewey.8 His works allow community to be detached from the idea of a concrete and circumscribed “place,” proposing instead an interpretation of community as joint sharing and joint participation, a sense of belonging to a shared reality, creation of spaces where individuals can recognize themselves and define shared goals in order to become an active audience. These are the very ingredients that are needed for the good functioning of a democratic society.

In other words, community is a constitutive and permanent dimension of social structure where the need for recognition and the desire for belonging, collaborative tension, as well as the interest in social ties and solidarity, all succeed in finding a means of expression and fulfillment. But the crucial prerequisite is that such aspects must be grounded on the modern and liberal presuppositions of individual freedom and autonomy. Failing this, they would relapse into anachronistic holisms.

I believe the definition of “community” André Gorz has recently provided is consistent with this interpretive perspective. “By ‘community,’ sociology customarily indicates either a group or a collectivity whose members

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are linked by an experience of solidarity which is concrete as it concerns concrete people.” It is therefore a bond – Gorz adds – which, unlike the peculiar bond of “society,” is neither “a bond established by law, nor a formalized and institutionally guaranteed bond, nor a contractual tie.” It is rather an “experienced, existential bond which loses its community quality the moment it becomes institutionalized.”

In this sense, I find myself in agreement with the Maussian gift theorists. Starting from the diagnosis of the deficit of ties and of cohesion running through modern societies, gift theorists propose to regard community as an expression of a tension towards social bond as an end in itself, i.e. as an expression of a fabric of “primary sociality” which is essential for the working of the “secondary sociality” – which is abstract and formal – of legal, economic, and political relations.

This approach is also fully consistent with the theory of “glocalization” which allows community to be seen no longer as a natural and ascribed reality, but as the product of a re-invention, as an “imagined community,” in Anderson’s words, striving to fulfill a need which global society has clearly disregarded.

2.

As I have already suggested, this compels us to reflect on the different matrices of the need for community. I think that, due to the complex situation of our time, these matrices can be reduced essentially to two:

1. community as a response to the pathologies of individualism in the global age;
2. community as a response to exclusion.

In the first case, the need for community responds to a need for identity, a need born out of the ongoing erosion of identity and the loss of certainties and meaning.

Recent sociological reflection, and the works by Zigmunt Bauman in particular, tends to underline the unprecedented condition of uncertainty springing from a number of factors that strongly undermine the certainties and models forged by the modern paradigm.

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It is a matter of loss of control and of a substantial loss of confidence in the institutions (political institutions in particular) caused by the crisis of politics in its modern form, i.e. caused by the crisis of the nation-state, and by the weakening of its sovereignty in the face of economic globalization and the exponential growth of technological power. In other words, there exists an ongoing division between “power” and “politics” which, together with the obsolescence of the individual-State model, creates confusion, disorientation, and uncertainty.

While the theories on the “end of politics” may be rejected as groundless, it is nevertheless possible to speak in terms of the ineffectiveness of the State rather than the weakening of the State, both in its Hobbesian functions of defender of safety and order and in its democratic functions of involving citizens in public life (crisis of citizenship).

Uncertainty and erosion of identity also result from the so-called “end of work” connected to the processes of de-localization of production, and from the precariousness produced by the new imperatives of “flexibility” which can be prejudicial to the processes of identity construction. And most of all – I would add – uncertainty is caused by the global risks mentioned earlier which lead, firstly, to the end of the feeling of immunity still granted to the individuals of early modernity and, in the second place, to a crisis of meaning in the light of the paradoxical possibility that mankind might precipitate its own destruction.

All this produces a number of effects on identity: taking over Honneth’s expression, I have termed these effects pathological in the sense that they betray the primary objectives and the promises of modernity (the self-realisation of the individuals). Indeed the global Self signals the definitive crisis of the modern and liberal model of homo oeconomicus who can plan and manage his/her own life, and who is capable of stipulating a rational pact in order to attain a form of social and political coexistence that can ensure certainty and order. Instead, the global Self appears to be characterized by a tendency to withdraw into himself/herself in an atomistic and self-defensive manner, by

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passivity, anxiety, and a sense of helplessness, by the loss of decision-making autonomy and participation, as well as by detachment from the public life.\footnote{See Pulcini, “L’Io globale,” pp. 58–60.}

Therefore, globalization causes a vacuum of identity and of meaning, paving the way to the emergence of two peculiar pathologies of individualism in the global age, which can be traced to two symbolically representative figures, as follows.

The first is the individual as a consumer, who has a parasitic relationship with the public sphere and passively accepts the global market agenda, i.e. the tyranny of consumption which expands beyond the mere sphere of commodities and encompasses and colonizes the material dimension of products but also the other spheres of existence (the body, politics, time).\footnote{See V. Codeluppi, \textit{Il potere del consumo}, Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003; M. Featherstone, \textit{Postmodernism and Consumer Culture}, London: Sage, 1994.}

In order to adequately describe such a situation one could call on the concept of “mimetic desire” suggested by René Girard,\footnote{R. Girard, \textit{Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque}, Paris: Grasset, 1961.} which drives individuals to desire what others desire and homologates them within the unlimited spiral of undistinguishable and objectless desires. This dynamics of desire creates similar and undifferentiated identities which have neither ties nor pathos, and whose main concern is to pursue ephemeral pleasures. Such identities are caught up in an acquisitive spiral that not only shows no interest in the fate of others, but is also blind to the new pathologies of the self which is paradoxically unable to recognize its own interest. Coercion to mimesis, which in the global world concerns increasingly wider areas of the planet, therefore ushers in the unbridled spread of conformism as well as a disquieting loss of differences which, far from uniting individuals, envelops them in the leveling force of undifferentiation and addiction to culturally and symbolically dominant models.

The second pathology regards the individual as spectator, both as passive user of a world ridden with spectacularization processes that deprive the different “vital worlds” of their meaning,\footnote{In particular, on mass-media spectator and on the process of publicization of the private which deprives the public dimension of its meaning, thereby condemning individuals to solitude, see Bauman, \textit{In Search for Politics}, passim.} and as a passive individual facing events which apparently cannot be controlled and managed. Starting from that inaugural event which heralded the global age, i.e. the nuclear threat, the global spectator is aware he is no longer safe, using Blumenberg’s metaphor, from shipwreck.\footnote{H. Blumenberg, \textit{Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer. Paradigma einer Daseinmetapher}, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979 [\textit{Shipwreck with Spectator. Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence}, trans. S. Rendall, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997].} He/she is the possible victim of events that cross territorial
borders by virtue of the *interdependence* which is perhaps the essential and most radically new characteristic of globalization.24

So, I would like to sustain that this situation of passivity and atomism, of vacuum and impotence, of uncertainty and disorientation is matched by the reactivation of the local dimension of community which is strictly connected to a strong *identity need*, threatened by dispersion and global undifferentiation. It is as if the search for *identity* in the global age could *only*, or *mainly*, take on *community* forms; as if – to take up a point highlighted by Arnold Gehlen some decades ago25 – the “need for community” grounded on strong *identity* would reappear when institutions (not only political) are experiencing a period of crisis and identity loses its traditional points of reference.

All this means not only that the *need for community is legitimate* – and must therefore be taken seriously – but also that it arises anew within society whenever the fabric of belonging, solidarity, and recognition of identity is corroded by processes of depersonalization and atomization.

The opposition hot/cold, affective/instrumental relations proposed by a number of thinkers becomes highly perspicacious in this context.26 The anonymous dynamics of globalization, the instrumental logic of the market and consumption, and the expropriating tyranny of technological power prompt the quest for a “warm” place of bonds of affection, solidarity, intimacy, capable of acting as a balance against the “cold,” abstracting and leveling dynamics of global society.

2.1

Let us now move to the *second source* of the need for community, which is not a response to the pathologies of individualism, but to the *sense of exclusion* felt by disadvantaged individuals and groups which are strongly engaged in a “struggle for recognition.”

For example, let us consider the analyses by Manuel Castells,27 who bases the co-existence of global and local essentially on the inclusion/exclusion

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24 Whether and to what extent these pathologies are the product of the modern model of the *homo oeconomicus* is a problem which that cannot be addressed within the scope of this paper. However, my assumption of the very concept of “pathology,” referring to “those developmental processes of society that can be conceived as processes of decline, distortions or even as ‘social pathologies’” (Honneth, “Pathologies of the Social,” p. 370) foreshadows a positive response.


dynamics by underscoring the close link between what he terms *global* deactivation of the Self and the *local* construction of identity.

When the Net switches off the self, the self, individual or collective, constructs its meaning without global, instrumental reference: the process of disconnection becomes reciprocal, following the refusal by the excluded of the one-sided logic of structural domination and social exclusion.28

In this regard, Castells proposes the concept of “resistance identity” which belongs to those actors who find themselves devalued by the logic of domination and who therefore build themselves a trench for resistance based on principles that are different from or opposed to those that permeate society’s institutions.

The fact is that “resistance identity” leads to the creation/reinvention of “community.” It creates forms of collective resistance against otherwise unbearable oppression, usually on the basis of identities that were clearly defined by history, geography, or biology, making it easier to essentialize the boundaries of resistance. Religious fundamentalism, territorial communities, nationalist self-affirmation, but also homosexual and feminist groups: all these are expressions of what Castells terms “the exclusion of the excluders by the excluded.”29

In a similar perspective, Clifford Geertz sees the creation of communities coming together in the defense of strong and compact identities structuring around either ethnical or religious foundations.30

In this case, the main concern is not so much the search for certainty or meaning or the need for solidarity as, rather, a strong need for reaffirmation of identity through the assertion of one’s own *difference*.

This latter concept must not only be kept carefully distinct from the concept of *inequality*, but should also be viewed as a countervailing concept that acts against inequality, or rather, against a broader concept of inequality. That is to say, the concept of *difference* stresses that pursuing the idea of equality and equity from the economic and legal point of view (i.e. from the point of view of distribution of resources and the guarantee of rights) only partially accomplishes the goal: *recognition* dynamics must be activated on the symbolic, cultural, linguistic, sexual, and religious plane.

It is no accident that the issue of *recognition* has recently taken on unparalleled relevance within contemporary reflection criticising the neoliberal paradigm.31 Emphasis on recognition highlights the growing impact of the “iden-

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tity conflict” today in comparison to the traditional “conflict of interests,” and lays bare the partiality and insufficiency of a Rawls-like theory of justice which concerns only redistribution policies based on the parameters of universal equity, without considering the need for recognition of differences. In other words, today identity establishes itself through the claim of belonging to a community as a place of mutual recognition of a difference.

This is the case for cultural and language communities, as well as ethnic and religious communities that are proliferating within the global society, testifying to a need for self-identification and recognition of traditions and cultural contexts, of values and life styles, a need that is intensified by marginalization and exclusion. It is this need that leads individuals and groups to re-create the fabric of social belonging by reactivating, as Geertz says, “primordial loyalties,” or by promoting “politics of difference” through which the need for recognition and inclusion can become crystallized and establish itself.33

3.

Now, in either case, whether the need for community derives from a desire for belonging or a desire for inclusion and recognition, far from being an archaic residue it cannot but appear to be legitimate. Thus in the first case, it seeks to compensate for the solidarity deficit generated by the crisis of social bonds; in the second case, it aims to repair the damage inflicted by experiences of “misrecognition.”

However, as can be observed day by day, in both cases there is an inexorable shift towards pathological and destructive configurations attributable, in my view, to the fact that the underlying identity need expresses itself in essentially reactive and self-defensive forms, thereby giving rise to forms of self-referential closure, re-invention and exclusion of the other.

Indeed, community tension takes on tribal forms where “we,” as Richard Sennett has incisively pointed out, tends to become a “dangerous pronoun”:34 it begins to take on regressive and strongly self-defensive characters that result in the we/they opposition and in the re-invention of an enemy to be exorcized and excluded as a menacing and disquieting “other.”

33 See Taylor, Multiculturalism; J. Habermas, Kampf um Anerkennung in Demokratischen Rechtstaat, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996.
34 Sennett, The Corrosion of Character.
Suffice it to consider the phenomenon, within and outside the Western world, of the “fear communities” mentioned by Bauman, who points out their “segregationist” character, or consider the “communities of risk” alluded to by Ulrick Beck, founded on the mere sharing of anxiety against the uncertainties generated by the global risk society. But above all, one may reflect on the phenomena of ethnic violence and religious intransigence, and the planet-wide drift towards terror, reviving archaic and tribal forms of atrocity throughout the world with an escalating spiral of an unprecedented series of conflicts.

The first case includes a scenario of perverse forms of solidarity and aggregation based on fear and exorcism, i.e. on reintroduction of the classical mechanism of construction of a “scapegoat,” In the second case, the phenomena in question can be ascribed to what I would like to call an absolutization of differences. Absolutization demands total refusal of any concept of critical openness or negotiation and is often grounded not on a true defense of values and traditions but on their unscrupulous and instrumental exploitation (one need only mention the new forms of global terrorism).

Therefore, if the pathologies of global society consist of undifferentiation and atomism, depersonalization and indifference, lack of pathos and the erosion of social ties, the pathologies of community consist of fusionality and ghettoizing closure, excess of pathos and violence, and the reintroduction of enclosing and excluding forms of social bonds.

3.1

What I am proposing, on the basis of this diagnosis, is that the need for community should be kept separate from its pathological degenerations, and that a normative perspective should be set in place with a view to correcting social pathologies.

In this perspective, I believe the idea of community I proposed at the beginning must be further developed and valued as shared action, or better, to use a lexical expansion taken from by Jean–Luc Nancy, as “being-in-common.” This would allow it to be freed from its cogent connection with a closed and circumscribed “place” delimited by definite boundaries.

35 Bauman, Missing Community.
36 Beck, Risk Society.
If we adopt this perspective, my assessment of what constitutes the limits of community-based approaches should be fairly clear.

Take for instance the recent new revival proposed by the communitarians. One may to some extent subscribe to the communitarian critique of liberal individualism and of the model of a “disengaged Self,” i.e. an abstract acontextual Self, particularly when faced with the above described pathologies of individualism derived from such a model. However, this criticism leads to the reintroduction of communities as “places” where the Self can recognize itself and find a new sense of belonging by sharing traditions and values which are not chosen, but available ab origine.

The presence of echoes of Tönnesian Gemeinschaft as a natural and ascribed dimension is, in my view, undeniable in this case. This entails the risk of underestimating that which, to take over the Rawlsian expression – we call the “fact of pluralism.”

Therefore, a revisitation of Nancy’s ideas, starting anew from an ontology of community, i.e. from the idea of being as being-with (être-avec), implies stressing the structural need for sharing, for regarding community not as an “island” where individuals aggregate around binding values and traditions they did not choose, but as community tension where the different singularities open up and “expose” themselves to sharing, to the “partage” in the multiplicity of their experiences.

In fact, the ontology of being-with stresses the inseparable co-existence of singularity and multiplicity. “Being,” in other words, is conceived neither as unity, a substance from which multiplicity originates and fans out, nor as an aggregation derived from the union of atoms which previously led separate existences. It is conceived as “being-with-one-another,” the original co-existence of singularities which together form the plurality of the living being.

It is hardly a coincidence that Nancy prefers to use “being-with” (être-avec), “being-in-common” instead of “community.” “Being-many-together is the original situation,” Nancy argues, echoing Hannah Arendt when he describes “Being” as the plural co-existence of singularities (in the Ockhamian sense of the term) each of which can never be reduced to any other, united and separated by a “spacing” (espacement) which preserves differences.

However, I would like to claim that the recovery of an ontology of community is only the first step, necessary for the de-localization of community, but not a sufficient step. In other words, awareness that Being is intrinsically com-

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40 Nancy, Being Singular Plural.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.
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munitarian is not enough to produce a corresponding political practice (and this – one may add – is the limit of any ontology).

Rather, the possibility of taking a further step is afforded by the intrinsic, uncharted, chances of the global age itself. In fact, the global age provides the objective bases for re-thinking community in universalistic terms (to use an only apparent oxymoron): a community of human kind united for the first time ever by a shared destiny, exposed to the same risks, and linked by the same network of interrelated phenomena.

By virtue of the “interdependence” of events which, as I suggested earlier, may be the greatest and most radically new characteristic of the global age – an interrelation through which a local event may have global effects (and vice versa) – individuals are linked by their own uncertainty and vulnerability, by the very same exposure to challenges and global risks (from global warming to the nuclear threat, from lethal viruses to environmental degradation, not to mention the new global terrorism).

Global risks contain within themselves the disquieting revelation that the world is no longer to be taken for granted, that life itself is exposed to unpredicted risks of degradation and destruction which are potentially irreversible. And, at the same time, they provide the evidence, albeit extreme and menacing, of an unprecedented and shared planetary condition. Global risks may therefore become a potential factor of unification and sharing in the sense that they expose mankind to a same destiny, beyond any difference and before any disparity.

Accordingly, as Günther Anders and Hans Jonas insightfully pointed out several decades ago, we are facing the risk of the “loss of the world,” at least of a world where a “successful life,” a life “worth living” – as Habermas calls it – is possible.

Otherwise stated, mankind as a whole is proposed as a new subject, a non metaphysical and “non voluntaristic” subject, grounded on the sharing of global risks and of world destiny. The foundation for this new subject resides

44 Here, unlike Cerutti (Global Challenges), who proposes to limit the concept of “global challenges” to the nuclear threat and global warming, I am using the concept of “global risks” in a wider sense.
47 Cerutti, Global Challenges, passim.
in the fact that whatever happens anywhere in the world unites us because it concerns us. In this regard, Anders’ reflections, wherein he detected that the first stirrings of this process lay in the rise of nuclear threat, remain as valid today as they were at the time:

[…] what religions and philosophies, empires and revolutions failed to bring about, the bomb succeeded in achieving: making us genuinely a single mankind. What may strike us all, concerns us all. The roof which is about to collapse becomes our own. As persons about to die, now we are really ourselves. For the first time ever, we are truly ourselves.

For the first time, we might say, the Hobbesian diagnosis which claims we are all equal in weakness has now become universally true; and that mankind takes shape as a subject starting from this new and factual truth, and from the ability to become aware of this status.

This does not mean that the community tension cannot give rise to moments of “local” fulfillment. On the contrary, there are multiple “local” experiences that are part and parcel of concrete situations and which are interwoven within the manifold variety of the contexts of life. It is in such experiences that, from time to time, community tension and the need for belonging crystallize.

However, the inclination to subscribe to such experiences cannot but be supported by the awareness of the multiplicity of belongings, which, for each and every one of us, cannot be identified with any definite role or value. It is such awareness alone that can protect against tribal identification, and allows us to relativize differences by freeing them from any pretence of absolutization and making them available to openness and negotiation in order to avert the onset of the dynamics of exclusion and fierce contrast.

This is not exactly “multiculturalism,” for the latter proposes the mutually tolerant co-existence of self-contained and inward-looking differences. Instead, this has to do with the co-existence, for each individual, of different realities (e.g. being a Muslim, Afghan, migrant woman who is also a wife and a mother) and with the possibility of recognizing oneself in different dimensions (such as the sexual, religious, national, family dimension) of the community which are made flexible by their very plurality.

In other words, it is dialogue – which by its very nature implies moments of conflict as well – between the differences within the individual that can ensure the recognition of external differences and the acceptance of pluralism.

Only if grounded on such principles can the dialogue between communities hoped for by André Gorz take place:

48 Anders, Die Antiquiertheit der Menschen, part IV, ch. 7.
The practice of dialogue becomes at last possible only if every community is able to rise above the constitutive values of its identity and to distance itself from that identity by relativizing it reflexively as one identity among others, i.e. as a ‘difference.’

However, in my view, the most relevant aspect is the new order of priorities: today, in the global age, in a cosmopolis where, for the first time, mankind is exposed to nothing less than the risk of perishing – or the risk of a life not worth living – and thus encounters the objective conditions for becoming a subject, the fact of being an inhabitant of the same planet and a member of this cosmopolis comes before other forms of belonging.

The perception of one’s own vulnerability and weakness may then turn into unprecedented forms of solidarity directed not only towards others who are closer and similar to us, but also towards unknown and distant others. As the gift theorists have highlighted, perceptively grasping the peculiar characteristic of community, what emerges is the need for a social bond in its own right, as an end in itself.

To sum up, the problem, however, lies in the capacity of individuals to translate objective conditions into awareness and subjective mobilization, and into effective political praxis. Or, to use George Bataille’s turn of phrase, the problem lies in the subjective capacity to seize the chance which the global age objectively makes available.

But this would open up two further issues which I will briefly touch upon.

The first concerns re-thinking the individual, taking into consideration the pathologies of individualism mentioned earlier, partly in order to ascertain which form of subjectivity is anthropologically fit to regard itself primarily as a member of the community of mankind, but also in order to set up the most appropriate normative dimension to meet the challenges posed by the global age.

The second concerns re-thinking institutional political forms that individuals are able to endow themselves with in order to build what I would like to term a cosmopolis of differences, which should set itself the goal of overcoming the opposition between community and society, between belonging and citizenship, between emotive and formal relations, and should aim to promote recognition of the need for their co-existence and mutual integration.

(Translated from Italian by Rachel Barritt)

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49 Gorz, Misères du Présent, p. 195.