

Immunitarian Democracy
by Roberto Esposito

1. Does "community" refer to democracy? If not, could it or is it too deeply embedded in the conceptual lexicon of the Romantic, authoritarian and racist Right? This is the question, one already asked by American neo-communitarianism, that is emerging again in Europe at the precise moment when, some, especially in France and in Italy, are risking thinking community anew. At issue is not only a legitimate question, but in some ways even an inevitable one, in which democratic culture deeply examines its own theoretical precepts and future. This doesn't change the fact though that it's the wrong question or that it's badly put. Wrong or badly put because it takes as its term of comparison -- in order to be related to the category of community - a concept, that of democracy that is utterly incapable of "understanding" it, not only because its modern meaning at least, arrives much later, but also because it is flatter and increasingly overwhelmed in a dimension that is entirely political and institutional.

With respect to this lack of depth and substance of the politicological notion of democracy, community has a very different semantic width, both on the vertical level of history and on the synchronic one of meaning. This isn't the place to attempt a complete reconstruction, though my recent research beginning with the etymological origins of the term communitas and even more before that of munus in Latin does confirm the historical and semantic richness of the concept (R. Esposito, 1998). What we can infer from the above discussion, however, is that the correct question isn't whether the community can become a part of the democratic lexicon, but whether even democracy

(Esposito, "Immunitarian Democracy," p.2)

can be a part or at a minimum acquire some of its meaning in the lexicon of community. Without wanting to show my hand too quickly, a first step is required, which focuses more on the second term. Here we aren't helped at all by the conceptual dichotomies with which 20th century philosophy has tried to define community, one that lost along the way the original meaning of community. I'm not talking only of the one constructed by the so-called American communitarians with respect to their presumed adversaries, the liberals, who constitute rather their exact interface in the specific sense that they unconsciously share the same subjectivist as well as exclusively partisan lexicon, applied not to the community but to the individual (where communities like individuals are distinguished between them, one from the other). But also in the more entrenched juxtaposition between "community" and "society," a juxtaposition that reaches its greatest point of typological elaboration in Ferdinand Tönnies's Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft. And this because here too, despite being better elaborated than the first, community remains completely inscribed within one of the two terms -- that of society -- such that it emerges as completely produced by it. This idea of community not only is born with modern society, but doesn't acquire meaning except in contrast to it. It is the Gesellschaft that "constructs" its own proper and ideal-typical reversal so as to be able to found itself -- in apologetic or slanderous terms depending on the point of the one who observing and judging. The fact is that the organic Gemeinschaft of which Tönnies and his many (and some less judicious) 20th century imitators speak has never existed as such is seen both as the sign and the confirmation of the mythological character of the dichotomy that founds it: it is nothing other than a figure of the self-

(Esposito, "Immunitarian Democracy," p.3)

interpretation of society in the phase of its maximum development, which coincides with it and its incipient crises.

Does this mean that one can't really say anything about community, that it doesn't have a logical or historical opposite that is capable of defining it categorically? As I have tried to show elsewhere, the situation is somewhat different, only that what is at issue refers to a meaning which has the same diachronic profundity and the same semantic power of the concept to that which it refers by way of contrast. Rather than being opposed to it from the outside as happens with the modern ideas of "individual," "society," and "freedom, it corresponds to it in a sort of originary co-belonging. This is why it shares, even if by way of contrast, the same etymological and conceptual foundation. Such a meaning I believe I've linked to the idea of "immunization," derived by way of extension from the Latin term immunitas, which is precisely tied to that of communitas from the relation, in the former negative and in the latter positive, with the lemma munus. If the members of the communitas are joined together by the same law, by the duties or gift [dono] that they have to give -- which is what precisely munus means-- immunis is instead he who is exempt or exonerated from them: he who does not have obligations with respect to the other and who can therefore conserve entirely his own proper essence [sostanza] as subject who is owner of himself (cfr. R. Esposito, 2002). What are the advantages of such an etymological-paradigmatic choice? Above all, there is the fact that the perfect co-implication of the two concepts means that one can line them up in a historical succession, in which one would follow the other, substituting it according to the optimistic (or pessimistic) modalities of any philosophy

(Esposito, "Immunitarian Democracy," p.4)

of history. Any individual, society, or kind of freedom that is based on the "progressive" or "regressive" attitude of the interpreter -- would prevail or would leave behind the ancient community. Furthermore it also opens up a larger horizon with which to see the same dynamic of democracy, understood not only in a political key, but also and above all in a socio-anthropological one. This is because if there is something in the endless contemporary debate on democracy it is precisely this long gaze on the constitution of the homo democraticus that Tocqueville had launched with incomparable forcefulness (cfr. for one of the few exceptions, M. Cacciari, 1997).

Yet the category of "immunization" is able to restore to the analysis of democracy the same breadth and the same interdisciplinary transversality with which the great social philosophy of the 1930s and 1950s surveyed the anthropology of the homo totalitarius -- I'm thinking here, in addition to the Frankfurt School, of the work associated with the Collège de sociologie in Paris and in particular of the monumental essay of Bataille's on fascism (G. Bataille, 1981). With one perspective there clearly comes into view the profound relation that joins in a single aporetic knot community and democracy: modern democracy speaks a language that is opposed to that of community to the degree to which it has introjected ever more into it a demand for immunization.

2. That the category of immunization, in direct opposition with that of community, was the most fruitful interpretive key for reading modern political systems was already apparent to the important negative anthropology of the last century (cfr. B. Accarino,

(Esposito, "Immunitarian Democracy," p.5)

1991): from Plessner to Gehlen to Luhmann, through the systemic reconversion of the "Hobbesian paradigm of order" undertaken by Parsons (cfr. M. Bortolini, 2005). In an essay titled precisely The Limits of Community, Plessner will juxtapose the immunitary logic of the "democratic game" to community (H. Plessner, 2001): in a world in which individuals who are naturally put at risk face off against each other in a competition whose stakes are power and prestige, the only way to avoid catastrophe is that of instituting between them enough distance to immunize everyone from everyone else. Against every communitarian temptation, the public sphere is that site in which men enter into relation with each other in the form of their dissociation. Here arises the need for strategy and control apparatuses that allow them to "live nearby" without coming into contact, and therefore to increase the sphere of individual self-sufficiency through the use of "masks" or "armor" that protect them from undesirable and insidious contact with the other. As Canetti reminds us, nothing frightens the individual quite like a being touched by what threatens to penetrate his own proper individual borders (E. Canetti, 1981, pp. 17-19). In this anthropological framework, one dominated by the principle of fear and the persistence of insecurity -- the very same politics winds up being identified with an art of diplomacy that conceals the relation of natural enmity in the civil forms of ceremony, tact, and conduct.

What in Plessner still maintains a constitution that oscillates between art and technique in Gehlen takes on a decisively institutional character. He too starts with the Hobbesian (and Nietzschean) consideration of the natural lack of man with respect to other animal species and of the need to transform this biological lack into the possibility

(Esposito, "Immunitarian Democracy," p.6)

for preserving life (A. Gehlen, 1986). But with respect to his predecessor he is keen on stabilizing this immunitarian option in a true and proper theory of institutions (U. Fadini, 1995). In a situation of environmental impact and pressure, institutions have the task of freeing man from the weight that the contingency of events places on him. This requires in the meantime a sort of "plasticity," which is to say a capacity to adapt to a given situation that doesn't expose the individual to unbearable conflict, but also a mastery of his or her own proper instincts that inhibit the drive to fragment and which channels them in a self-reproducing sense, in the same way in which the satisfaction of needs is contained and put off in a framework of rigidly controlled compatibility. Only through this double renunciation can man be immunized securely against the respective dangers determined by his own structure of lack: to occupy that initial void that distances it from itself, to re-appropriate that which isn't naturally his own [proprio]. But to occupy the void and to make proper what is improper, is the equivalent of reducing to extinction the "common." And in fact the exemption from environmental contingency which institutions ensure coincides for the democratic individual with a distancing from the world in which it is rooted and for that very reason, with a lifting up from that common munus that compels it with respect to others. In this way the individual is led to close his originary opening and to be circumscribed within his own proper interior. What else is immunization if not a form of escalating interiorization of exteriority? If the community is our "outside," the outside-of-us, immunization is that which leads us again within ourselves breaking every form of contact with the outside.

(Esposito, "Immunitarian Democracy," p.7)

Niklas Luhmann was surely the person who carried this logic to its extreme. His theory, situated at the intersection between the functionalism of Parsons and the regulative paradigm of cybernetic models, his theory constitutes the most refined explication of the immunitary logic as a specific form of modernization. In addition he argued not only that "a series of historical tendencies indicate a growing concern from the beginnings of the modern epoch and especially from the 18th century on, with the actualization of a social immunology (N. Luhmann, 1990, p.588), but also that the immunitary system which coincides originally with law [diritto], was extended to all areas of social life, from economics to politics. Such a tendency was already manifested in the initial Luhmannian definition of the relation between system and environment, where the problem of system control of dangerous disorder caused by the environment is resolved not by a simple reduction of environmental complexity, but rather through its transformation from external complexity into internal complexity within the system itself. But a second strategy with even graver consequences for environmental difference is added to the first of interiorization activated by the immunitary process. And that is its complete inclusion within the system, which is to say, its objective elimination. Such a development in Luhmann's perspective, which is determined by the adoption of the biological concept of autopoiesis consists in shifting the lens away from the defensive level of systemic governance of the environment to that of a self-regulation within the system, which is completely independent and autonomous with respect to environmental pressures: the system is reproduced in a form that is always more complex, itself constituting the elements that make it up. It's clear that this

(Esposito, "Immunitarian Democracy," p.8)

perfectly circular logic has the effect not only of breaking apart any form of relation with the outside but also calling into question the very idea of "outside." If the contradictions that ensnare democratic systems have in the final analysis the function of alarming their immunitary apparatus so as to set in motion a defensive reaction against every threat of destruction, this means that these contradictions no longer pit outside against inside. They are nothing other than the outside of the inside, one of its simple folds. But this means at the same time that the immunitary system has "immunized" the very same communication, including it in its referential mechanism. It also means that the entire communicative flow is nothing other than a self-reproducing projection of the process of immunization: "The immunitary system," Luhmann concludes, "deploys 'no', in the event of the refusal to communicate. Such a system operates without communication with the environment" (ivi, p.613).

If we compare the passages within Luhmann's immunitary theory with the history of that ever more important branch of bio-medicine, namely a true and proper immunology, their similarities are striking. We know that the object of immunology is the capacity of vertebrates to react to the introduction of substances extraneous to the organism is to produce anti-bodies that are able to defend their bio-chemical identity, in system terms of adequately responding to the challenges of the environment represented by outside antigens. But this general overview --with the move from chemical immunology to molecular immunology -- undergoes profound modifications that move in the same direction of meaning as those of experienced in the theory of systems, namely from the defense from the outside to self-regulation within. The

(Esposito, "Immunitarian Democracy," p.9)

underlying question pivots on the role of the antigen, which is to say the virus received from outside for the production of the antibody. In what way is the reaction of the antibody connected to the antigenic action? The response which from the middle of the last century begins to make headway beginning with Ehrlich and then until Erne is that the immunitary antibody isn't determined by the introduction of the antigen but pre-exists it. Without being able to trace (and not even partially at that) the most salient aspects of a long and controversial debate (on this score, see A.I. Tauber, 1999), what matters for our reconstruction is that in molecular immunology, as exactly in Luhmann's theory, the central problem isn't the organism's capacity for distinguishing its own components from those outside it, but rather that of the self-regulation within the immunitary system itself. If anti-corporeal cells communicate even in the absence of the antigen, which is to say, if external stimuli are lacking, this means that the immunitary system takes on the characteristics of a network of internal recognitions [riconoscimenti] that are absolutely self-autonomous. It is the final result of an immunitary war that modernity fights from its very beginning against the risk of communitarian "infection." There is no longer an outside that it must defend itself from; that the other doesn't exist except as a projection of the self. This is the same as recognizing that the immunitary system doesn't have limits of time or space. It always exists and it is to be found everywhere. It coincides with our identity. We are identified to ourselves as us -- definitively drawn away from our being altered by community.

(Esposito, "Immunitarian Democracy," p.10)

3. And so? If this is the condition that characterizes the present moment, where ought we to look for relief? Is it still possible to activate a thought of community in our democracies? Can we join community and democracy again but this time differently somehow? Can we imagine a democracy that doesn't immunize, one that isn't already immunized or has the process of a generalized immunization destroyed both community itself as well as the possibility for thinking it? I don't think so. I don't think that the first order of the day is closing down thinking community, but on the contrary it's my view that never more than today is a reactivation of community called for. What else are we told, what else do we talk about, if not the question of community, of its absence, but also of its demands: bodies, faces, the gazes of millions of starving, of deportees, of refugees whose images, terrible in their starkness, flash across our television screens from every corner of the globe?

And yet isn't it still the community -- by which I mean the relation, our cum, "we" as cum -- that is recalled in every birth, every encounter even of the most anonymous and daily kind, the most seemingly banal? Nevertheless, as always happens, it is precisely that which we most need to reflect on that becomes the least obvious. In point of fact never more than today does the thought of community remain exposed to the double risk of forgetfulness and being unrecognizably altered [deformazione]; to repression and betrayal. Forgetfulness, above all, because the end, the collapse of communism -- of communism completely and of all communisms -- produced a void of ideas, like a vortex in which the question of community seems to have been filtered out, thrown into the abyss, discredited and embarrassed by regimes

(Esposito, "Immunitarian Democracy," p.11)

that exploded or imploded under the weight of their errors and their horrors. But in addition to the danger of forgetfulness and erasure another danger draws alongside and is superimposed, not less but perhaps even more serious: that of the perversion of the idea of community into its opposite, in that which raises walls rather than breaks them down. This happens far from us on the world's periphery, but also close to us, and is found at the heart of our world, because community has been reduced and brought low to the defense of new and exclusive attachments to groups [particularismi], of small nations enclosed and walled in against what lies outside, hostile and opposed to everything which doesn't belong to them; that might weaken the obsessive linking with identity and with what is considered to be properly their own. In this case, therefore, the image of the fortress is superimposed over that of the desert, which decidedly reverses the communitarian horizon in a new and even more powerful immunitarian oscillation or drift of meaning [deriva]. What are the new ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities that are arising on the other side of the Adriatic, in Asia and in Africa, but also in the center of Los Angeles, if not the most aggravated form of auto-immunity with respect to a common existence? If not the most dramatic unleashing of self-appropriation of that which appears as insidious in the other? If not the attempt to abolish every exteriority with regard to a interiority folded again within its own endogenous reproduction?

The idea of communitas -- and even before that of munus from which it derives - moves us in a sense that is radically opposed to such a seemingly unstoppable drive towards interiorization (though we could also say "internment" of the immunitarian

(Esposito, "Immunitarian Democracy," p.12)

sort). It refers, on the contrary, to an exteriorization of existence; or better an interpretation of the same existence as exteriority, experience, ecstasy, in the radical sense of these expressions: as the escape of the subject from itself or as its originary opening to otherness that constitutes it from the beginning in the form of a "being with" or of a "with-being." Être-avec and Mitsein. These are precisely the two perspectives put forward in the last century by the two greatest philosophers of community: Martin Heidegger and Georges Bataille. Now I think that we ought to resist the temptation to see them both just and only as philosophers, too removed from us, too abstract with respect to the problems we face today. If we read them without getting lost (given the particular density of their lexicons), we can't help but see that they speak precisely about it; of community as the exteriority of that which appears enclosed within, of the irreducible nucleus -- and for which reason empty of the other -- of that immunitarian system that seems ever more to limit our horizon of meaning.

But if the question that they offer us is one we share -- that of what is "outside" the subject and of the subject -- there are different ways of responding, as well as what we can infer with regard to the underlying analysis with which we began. How to think -- but also live -- the "common" in the time of immunization? Where can we find the outside of that which is presented only from within? Bataille's mode is of the fractured [effrattivo] sort. It moves through the breaking of the immunitary cord and the singling out of possible points of contagion between subjects that outstrip it; of wounds through which social circulation can move again via the communication of reciprocal lacks (G. Bataille, 1997). In this case the reference to munus is part of an idea of the loss of what is

(Esposito, "Immunitarian Democracy," p.13)

one's own [proprio], of the ex-propiation or weakening of what is one's own [depropriazione] that contests the immunitary logic in its very presupposition, which is to say the preservation and the defense of the "self" from what threatens from outside. From here it is a short distance to contesting the limited economy [economia ristretta], as Bataille defines the utilitarianist paradigm of our democracies, in favor of an economy enlarged or generally dominated no longer by the imperative of accumulation, but by the principle of unproductive expenses and also therefore of the gift. What Bataille sketches is, in fact, a conception of the energetic abundance radically juxtaposed to the theory of organic lack of the animal-man which precisely belongs to the neo-Hobbesian anthropology of Plessner and Gehlen. While they, as we saw, put into action a series of protective measures directed towards freeing the individual from his communitarian bonds, Bataille distinguishes in the stitches of the instinct of self-preservation, an opposite though no less stronger tendency, for the disintegration of the individual identity in a common donative act of weakening what is one's own [depropriazione].

Where Bataille examines the anthropological dimension of such a tendency, Heidegger shifts his attention onto the ontological root. His question doesn't concern so much the inter of esse, as much as the esse of inter: not the sociality of being, but the being of the cum (with) and as cum (with). What does this mean for us when we turn to the question of democracy? What does it mean that being itself has the form of cum? How can we translate into our language a similar ontologia of community? First in the simple proposition that community is, or better, is given irrespective of our will or

(Esposito, "Immunitarian Democracy," p.14)

capacity to achieve it. It is also given -- perhaps above all -- in the moments in which it seems to disappear from our horizon, in which as was noted earlier, it seemed to have been transformed into a desert or to be distorted into a kind of fortress. Here too the negation of community is something that belongs to our common being; it is a mode, albeit defective or negative, of community, just as solitude, conflict, and anomie are. Indeed Heidegger says something more in this regard -- but only then to contradict himself in other parts of his work and his life. In opposition to every temptation to conceive the community in terms of "authentic" or "one's own" [proprio] -- which is to say as the self-appropriation on the part of man or a population of one's own essence -- community always has to do with an inauthentic modality, one in opposition to what is one's own [improprio]. What else is the "common" if not what isn't one's own; if not that which is not, is properly no one's, but exactly general, anonymous, indeterminate; that isn't determined by race or by sex; that is pure existence exposed to the absence of sense, of foundation and of destiny?

Yet a final key still remains with which to re-read Heidegger's mit (with), this time as being in relation to his ambivalent assessment of technology [tecnica] as an extreme danger, but also as a potential resource. Here I have in mind the phenomenon of globalization of which technology constitutes the final and most striking configuration. Globalization isn't limited to representing it, but is in fact technology absolutely spread out in a planetary power that meets no resistance or difference [difformità], which it doesn't make a part of itself, making it conform to its own model. In this sense globalization also expresses the decisive closure of the immunitary system

(Esposito, "Immunitarian Democracy," p.15)

on itself. Indeed it is the immunization driven to a sole principle of the regulation of individual and collective life in a world made identical with itself; precisely made global [mondalizzato]. And yet this "mondalization" carries with it another result that moves beyond the same horizon of Bataille and Heidegger. It doesn't only coincide with the destruction of meaning but also its withdrawal from every general principle, as well as from every given, waited for, prescribed meaning. Globalization is also the return of the world to its pure state of phenomenality [fenomenicità], to its being nothing other than world (J.-L. Nancy, 1997). In other words, that this is the only world -- the entire world -- also means that it is only world; without presuppositions, origins, or ends that transcend its simple existence. From this point of view, therefore, one which sees the progressive erosion of the Nation-State and modernity that produced it as part of a unique turning point, can perhaps a democracy on just such a planetary scale be thought, with all the necessary caution and attentiveness to the difficulties of the case at hand; or better, the problem of democracy can be extended to the only level that is capable of ripping it free from the immunitarian drift that it appears destined to follow: that of a world community, which is to say of the only world that we have in common. We know that immunization functions through the controlled incorporation of the communitarian "germ" that it wants to neutralize. But what if we were to reverse the operation? What if we tried to rethink community precisely by completing the process of immunization? At bottom a world without an outside, a world completely immunized -- by definition doesn't have an inside. The culmination of a successful

(Esposito, "Immunitarian Democracy," p.16)

immunization can also be extended further as well so as to immunize it from itself: to reopen the breach, or the time, of community.

-Translation by Timothy Campbell

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(Esposito, "Immunitarian Democracy," p.18)