# Community

*Richness and Complexity of a Fragile Concept*

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The intention of my contribution is to propose a reflection on the concept of *community*, a term closely linked to the syntagm of *educating community*, which directly questions those who are involved in education in various capacities and which we hear repeatedly pronounced even in contexts other than education. It is, in my opinion, a very fragile concept, the richness and structural complexity of which it may be useful to reveal.

*Key words*: community, relationship, identity, education, politics.

*Comunità. Ricchezza e complessità di un concetto fragile*
L'intento del mio contributo è quello di proporre una riflessione sul concetto di comunità, termine strettamente legato al sintagma di comunità educante, che interpella direttamente coloro che a vario titolo si occupano di educazione e che sentiamo più volte pronunciare anche in contesti diversi da quelli formazione scolastica. Si tratta, a mio avviso, di un concetto molto fragile, di cui può essere utile svelare la ricchezza e la complessità strutturale.

*Parole chiave*: comunità, relazione, identità, educazione, politica.

*Community: a critical reading*

What does *community* mean? It is not easy to enclose the meaning of this concept in a single definition: to speak of community is to unravel an intricate skein, a bundle of discourses that intersect each other and, I believe, force one to surrender to the possible 'aporeticity' of conclusions. Moreover, it is equally difficult to unambiguously define the meaning of *communitarianism*. Indeed, Salvatore Veca has made it clear that communitarianism is so varied that it is almost impossible to identify something as a 'communitarian theory' (Veca, 2002). Broadly speaking, communitarianism can be defined as a

> normative theory or ideology that applies the metaphor of the family and/or the group of friends to the state, the nation, the social class, and that conceives the social bond on the model of the relations existing in small groups. Or again, out of metaphor, which conceives the state and other complex collective entities as aggregations of several families or groups assimilated to them (Pazé, 2004, p. 7)[1].

As we can see, it is a polysemic concept, full of implications and semantic references that are not easy to clarify. That is why, given its richness and complexity, I will have to consider that I have achieved part of my objective if I can at least raise questions rather than unravel problematic knots.

I will start with a formula that effectively describes what I will later attempt to clarify: as a concrete 'determination' between singularity and universality, the *community* is the place in which a continuous mediation between 'different' not free of contradictions takes place, it is that space of relationship as a 'limit' between different subjectivities whose problematic nature is easy to perceive, if it is true, as Roberto Esposito has argued, that "the community is not the *inter* of the *esse*, but the *esse* as *inter*" (Esposito, 2006, p. 149).

What does this statement mean? That, on closer inspection, *being in common* is a 'relation', not an 'entity', and is endowed with meaning only insofar as it presents itself as that relational bond between individuals that can transform their singularity and specificity into something else, into something 'situated in relation' and therefore different. It follows that the

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[1] I would like to point out that all translations of the passages quoted in the article are by me.

identification between *community* and *what is proper*, what we feel intimately belongs to us, is by no means taken for granted. What is 'common', in fact, is not what belongs to the individual as 'proper', but the exact opposite. This leads Esposito to conclude that individuals-in-community are paradoxically united "not by a 'more' but by a 'less', by a lack, by a limit" (Esposito, 2006, p. XIII).

Put another way, in order for there to be a community, there must be some kind of relational bond that allows particular singularities to be overcome, since the community does not present itself as a substance in and of itself, but only as a relationality between the different subjects that make it up.

From this it can be deduced, again according to Esposito's interpretation – who is not afraid of the possible nihilist landing place of his discourse – that the community condition is founded on a 'nothing in common', on a lack that does not possess its own significance, but on the contrary must be filled with meaning and exposed "at the same time to the opening of a meaning yet unthought of" (ibidem, p. 162). The ancipitous nature of community is thus evident and this explains why the philosopher comes to the conclusion that

> we must always bear in mind this double face of *communitas*: it is both the most adequate, indeed the only, dimension of the animal 'man', but also its potentially dissolutive drift (ibidem, p. 15).

On this preliminary theoretical framework, I will try to develop my reasoning, which will revolve around two thematic focuses: the meaning of community understood as a *relationship* and that of community conceived as a place of *identity recognition*. I will immediately anticipate that I consider the first meaning to be positive, albeit to be radically problematised; the second negative, because it is insidious and not without dangerous socio-political implications. In fact, it will not be useless to recall that recent history testifies that

> together with *community, identity, difference* and *recognition* have imposed themselves as keywords, and the concepts of *nation* and *homeland* have made their reappearance, more or less brilliantly, accompanied by those of *ethnicity* and *culture*: all notions traceable, in the prevailing usages, to the paradigm of an organicist, premodern and anti-modern conception of social life (Bovero, 2002, p. VII).

Many careful interpreters of the contemporary world have spoken critically about the concept of community. A historian of the calibre of Eric J. Hobsbawm, for instance, has not hesitated to state that

> the word 'community' – the 'intellectual community', the 'public relations community', the 'gay community' and so on – has never been used so hollowly and indiscriminately as in these decades, in which communities in the sociological sense are extremely difficult to find in real life (Hobsbawm, 1994/2016, p. 499).

His words are very clear and far-sighted, in total consonance with the equally clear-cut position of the philosopher Alain Badiou, who has pointed out how the lemma *community* has undergone a linguistic shift from a purely denotative meaning to a connotative one that, in his opinion, has accentuated its reactionary valence. His indignant stance is therefore not surprising:

> I oppose every day politically the different forms of communitarianism, through which the parliamentary state tries to divide and circumscribe the latent popular zones of its inconsistency: in the use of expressions such as 'the Arab community', the 'Jewish community', or the 'Protestant community', I see only national or religious reactions (Badiou, 1989/1991, p. 81).

And yet, the echo of the calls to 'be community', or to 'build a new community', resounds quite frequently, which, especially in its 'educating' version, seems to emerge as the only concrete response to the loss of effectiveness of schools and educational institutions.

The idea of community is looked upon with a kind of yearning nostalgia, almost as if it were seen as a "warm and welcoming place" to which one wishes to return, according to Zygmunt Bauman's effective metaphor (Bauman, 2000/2005).

There are also those who propose to sing the praises of communitarianism, which represents the concrete socio-political version of community. Costanzo Preve, for example, recalls that

> the community is the only place where contemporary man can jointly exercise his dual rational and social nature. Any temptation to exodus and secession is understandable, it perhaps solves his single problem of

enduring a senseless life, but leaves intact the problem of the unity of sociality and rationality (Preve, 2006, p. 251).

From an educational point of view, it must be said that the idea of a school as an educating community is not new in the panorama of pedagogical studies (above all Italian) in which, at least from the post-World War II period, the results of the experiences of the European and American active schools of the early 20th century oriented in an anti-authoritarian and communitarian sense were transposed. John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Jean-Ovide Decroly and Éduard Claparède proposed a model of an open and renewed school-workshop in which the active participation of pupils was placed at the centre of the interests of the entire educational system.

Around the Sixties and Seventies of the last century, then, through the impact of the so-called *Faure Project*, later widely transposed by subsequent legislation, the 'educating community' project was consolidated and the conviction that the school should become a community managed in a broader and democratic manner, assuming "the character of a community that interacts with the broader social and civic community" (Presidential Decree no. 416, 31/5/1974 – Italy).

The underlying wish is therefore confirmed that the school represents an educational environment rich in experience, capable of interacting with the broader civil and social community of which it is part for the complete formation of the personality of individuals.

The intention is hard to disagree with. However, the repeated calls for the reconstruction of an educating community give rise to the suspicion that perhaps the latter has not yet been fully realised. And if so, could the cause be traced to a kind of semantic vagueness that, even historically, has surrounded the concept of community? I do not want to put forward hypotheses, but I do believe that, in any case, it might be useful to highlight the aporias that accompany a syntagma that is often unclear from a semantic-conceptual point of view.

## Community as relationship

First of all, one might recall, as Jean-Luc Nancy has sharply observed, that the concept of community has always been a very tenuous one. The only way

to grasp its meaning is to use an emotional interpretative register, privileging only its 'affective' side:

> The lost or broken community – he writes, – can be exemplified in infinite ways, with all sorts of paradigms: natural family, Athenian *pólis*, Roman republic, early Christian community, guilds, communes, brotherhoods. Each time, however, a lost age in which the community wove strong, harmonious and unbreakable bonds is in question (Nancy, 1990/1992, pp. 33-34).

In fact, it is not uncommon to come across a kind of mythologising of the same, in which there is evidently a dialectical alternation of "loss and rediscovery, of alienation and re-appropriation, of flight and return that links all philosophies of community to a mythology of origin" (Esposito, 2006, p. XXV).

The origin, as we know, refers back to the archaic and classical Greek world in which, however, *community, society* and *state* are not yet differentiated concepts. The term community recalls the *koinonía* (from *koinós, common, public*) used by Plato, the *koinonía politikè* attested in Aristotle and the *societas politica* in vogue in the Roman context.

In the second book of the *Republic*, Plato clearly explains that the *state* (obviously rendered with the meaning of *polis*), originates when human beings, driven by the necessity of each other, "gather in one place many associates and auxiliaries, and to this coexistence (*koinonía*) [they] give the name of city" (Plato, 1994, II, 550-553).

In the seventh book, the philosopher is even more explicit: in the ideal city he prefigured, what counts is the wellbeing of the totality of citizens and it is necessary to harmonise the interests of all categories of men, "making them share in that profit that individuals are capable of bringing to the *community* (*to koinón*) and forging itself into the city of such men [...] in order to use it to cement the city in a single bond" (*ibidem*, VII, 265-270).

Aristotle, too, does not hesitate to reiterate that "every state (*polis*) is a *community* (*koinonía*)" (Aristotle, 2016, I, 1252), and he analyses its initial formation from the natural community constituted by the family, then by several families united in villages, and finally to the perfect form represented by the state, which is by its nature prior to the other community forms, since "the whole must necessarily be prior to the part" (*ibidem*, 1253).

But it is only with the classical sociology of the late 19th century that *community* begins to be differentiated from *society* and the concept to take on a predominantly affective sense. Ferdinand Tönnies, in fact, clarifies that *Gemeinschaft* (*community*) is the social unity founded on a common way of feeling that implies confidential, intimate and exclusive relations; whereas *Gesellschaft* (*society*), refers to the sense of pure coexistence of independent, separate and free persons in public space: "In community with his own a person finds himself from birth, bound to them for better or worse, while one goes into society as in a foreign land" (Tönnies, 1887/2011, p. 29).

Max Weber also proposes a similar reading. Recalling the various types of communities, from domestic to ethnic, from market to political, he points out that a community is founded on a "subjectively felt (affective or traditional) common belonging of the individuals who participate in it" (Weber, 1922/1974, p. 38).

I do not wish to be mistaken, but it seems to me that the sense with which the idea of community is alluded to today is precisely this: a place in which a very precise type of relationship is created between individuals, a *hortus conclusus* that allows one to feel spatially close, to experience the same reality, to share values and meanings, to feel a sense of belonging (Aime, 2019, pp. 54-55). In short, an affective interpretation of the community bond seems to prevail, resting on a form of naive voluntarism that advocates or prescribes the modality of relational exchanges between individuals. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find oneself in the presence of appeals indicating what 'must be done' to preserve community cohesion or what 'should be done' to strengthen ties within the community (even if it is an educating one).

However, if the community is not an entity, but only a *relationship* between subjects, and this relationship is precisely the community's defining characteristic, it means that subjects participate in the community as subjects-in-relation with other subjects, not as subjects with a single identity. Perhaps it will now be clearer what Esposito meant when he wrote that community is not an *esse*-inter, but an *inter*-inter. It is the 'between' that prevails, the *relationship* – a term we should always bear in mind that it comes from the verbs *religo* and *refero*, in which the sense of a bond of reciprocity is strongly emphasised.

The real problem seems to me, therefore, to be the specific declination of this relationship, that is, the way it is conceived.

Taking for granted the assimilation of the community to a form of affective 'kinship' of the family type, it seems legitimate to consider it as a relationship between equals, between like-minded people, between brothers, in short, between individuals who reside within a protected space, different from those outside it.

As Marco Aime has observed, the existence of a community is given by the traceability of certain spatial and temporal parameters: according to a spatial dimension in fact, for there to be a community it is first of all necessary that there is a boundary, a symbolic line between *us and the other*, between us and the 'stranger' (Aime, 2019); secondly, the fact emerges that the boundary is ideally drawn on a perception of self as a cohesive group, a perception that acts as a mask that offers itself to the outside world; finally, the boundary is always mobile, not absolute, but relational and 'oppositional', that is, continually demarcated in order to fence off a territory from that of other communities.

It will not have escaped that this last marker presents strong margins of criticality. It should at least warn that it must be assessed with great vigilance and a critical spirit, since the risk of creating closed systems that are impervious to dialogue with the outside world is quite palpable. Indeed, how will it be decided who is inside and who is outside the community, preserving the character of a 'family' and 'friendly' place that one would like to attribute to a living and inclusive community? Community identities, to follow a perplexed Zygmunt Bauman, reinforced by a continuous work of demarcation of boundaries, end up feeling mutually antagonistic, producing the opposite effect to the one desired (Bauman, 2000/2005).

Even according to a time parameter, the indicators of community membership reinforce these perplexities. When does a community originate? How far back in time is it necessary to go to recover its 'roots' and founding archetypes? It will not be difficult to ascertain that community begins when those within arbitrarily 'decide' to make it begin, pandering to the nostalgic inclination of Western sensibilities towards that quasi-mythological time to which Nancy alluded. This explains the occurrence of frequent 'temporal amnesias' (Hobsbawm, 1994/2016) linked to a past perceived as 'inconvenient', or conversely, the attempt to emphasise some events and minimise others in order to build up the 'respectable' historical tradition of a group of like-minded people.

But if community is conceived as a relationship between like-minded people, how will one behave with those who are not like-minded? What kind

of dialogue can one establish with the *other*, with the *different*, with the *non-friend*?

This seems to me to be the truly diriment point of the question, which can only be grasped by reversing the perspective of observation: for a community to be at least conceivable, its preliminary transcendental condition must be fulfilled, that is, it must be established between "authentically distinct, between the stranger, the pilgrim, bearing within himself his own laws and customs, and the host, who at the same time recognises that he is always, intrinsically, potentially *hostis* in turn" (Cacciari, 1995, p. 124). This is what distinguishes *community* from mere *cohabitation*, warns Massimo Cacciari. The *cum-* of community would not make sense between identical people. Only when one comes to perceive the maximum distance with the 'neighbour-distinct' does one begin to think community, since

> only a 'gaze' that preserves the other in his distinction, an attention that understands him precisely on the basis of the recognition of his distance, can produce community [...]. The intelligence of one's neighbour does not consist in grasping him, in capturing him, in trying to 'identify' him to us, but in *housing him* as the perfectly distinct one (Cacciari, 1995, p. 125).

It is the relationship with the other, therefore, that is the focal point of any authentic discourse on community because it is always a matter of coming to terms with otherness, with the *alter* that becomes *socius*, perhaps in the mediation of the concrete synthesis of society, as Giovanni Gentile would have said. The isolated individual, in short, is not a concrete and possible case, since 'before this transcendental society there is no conceivable man who is not an abstract immediate object' (Gentile, 1946/2014, p. 1286).

And it is precisely by referring to Gentile that Cacciari concludes that "in order for an idea of community to be truly founded, the *hostis-hospes* exchange must take place in me at all times" (Cacciari, 1995, p. 125), almost recalling the theorisation of the *societas in interiore homine* in which the abstract individual is reabsorbed into the dynamic relationship between I and We.

## Community as a place of identity recognition

Clearly, at this point it is imperative to address the second theoretical knot I had anticipated, namely the link between community and identity.

The 'community' lexicon is in fact founded on a linguistic apparatus that makes use of insidious vocabulary such as *identity, roots, land, nature*, which adumbrate the risk of an ethnicization of society, in turn not far from a kind of social tribalism. Michel Maffesoli argued that ancient community relations would only slowly change their appearance, allowing themselves to be contaminated by a form of 'contemporary neo-tribalism' marked by emotional, fusional and gregarious value patterns (Maffesoli, 2000/2004). The new form of social community of the contemporary era, according to the French sociologist, would, in short, be the tribe, i.e., a completely atypical aggregation of individuals, which is placed beyond any defined political horizon.

Yet the concept of individual identity is always central in historical eras in which geographical, political and social boundaries appear more hybrid and blurred, with the consequence that "the fusion of real individual frailties and weaknesses in the (imaginary) strength of the community produces a conservative ideology and an exclusivist attitude" (Bauman, 2001, p. 98).

If Bauman's warnings are true, and I have no reason to doubt them, I wonder how we can get out of this *impasse*? I do not think I can suggest solutions, but I do agree with those who argue that it is precisely around the concept of subjective identity that the most critical issues for the community idea thicken, since it is in order to preserve this identity 'purity' that the community risks closing in on itself, to defend its boundaries and protect itself from a possible clash with other communities. Therefore, it may be necessary to review the ethical-political assumptions of this identity paradigm, renegotiate its ontological status and, above all, attempt to expand its boundaries on a planetary scale, rather than making it a weapon of ethnic, geographical or religious recognition. After all, "life devoted to the search for identity abounds with meaningless words. 'Identity' means coming out of the pack, it means being different and as such unique; and, therefore, the search for identity can only divide and separate" (Bauman, 2001, pp. 16-17).

It is not excluded that we need to go beyond the idea of 'individuality', already identified by Hegel as a figure of fulfilment, in favour of a new presence of 'singularity', as Giorgio Agamben has argued (Agamben, 2017).

The problem is in fact given by the relationship between the many different singularities that perceive themselves as individual and at the same time universal. This is the theoretical knot that, according to Agamben, must be preliminarily untied using a manoeuvre of meta-identitarian analysis that could be configured as the last existential possibility for the community. One only gets out of the trap, in other words, by recognising that "being is being whatever", a kind of 'singularity without identity' that allows one to "make one's being-ness not an individual identity and property, but a singularity without identity" (Agamben, 2017, p. 9). In this sense then, community can also be that 'community that comes', which is purely evenemential in nature.

What 'happens', as Slavoj Žižek has so aptly elucidated, is the event as "an effect that seems to exceed its own causes" (Žižek, 2014, p. 11) and which opens up a space of transformation, of change, of novelty in the reality that appears to us.

But such a possibility of renewal is absolutely necessary if we look at community as a creative space of existential redesign and not as that "apparent community – to borrow from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels – in which individuals have hitherto been united [which] has always made itself autonomous against them at the same time, being the union of one class against another, for the dominated class was not only an entirely illusory community, but also a new chain. In the real community individuals acquire their freedom in and through their association" (Marx, Engels, 2018, p. 120).

However, despite the structural ambivalence of the concept of community, the latter seems to be perceived as a necessity, according to what Costanzo Preve, among others, has argued:

> The 'truth' of the community moment lies in this: the individual needs a concrete mediation capable of linking his irreducible singularity to the abstract universality of humanity thought of in a planetary manner. This mediation, which in Hegelian language we might also call 'determination' (*Bestimmung*) is precisely the community (Preve, 2006, p. 253).

If Preve is right, if the community is indeed the only possible dimension for human beings, I believe that it should not be considered as the final and immutable outcome of a concluded historical process, but as a starting point for possible new configurations of the human being in which a vital space

for education could also be given. But always bearing in mind that, if the communitarian dimension of human sociality is an occurrence impossible to avoid, it may be called *communitas*, or *societas*, or even *state*, but it will always have to be confronted with the theme of relationality between human beings.

I think Bauman is absolutely right when he states that

> the vacuum left by the retreat of the nation-state is filled by self-styled neo-tribal communities, postulated or imagined: and if it is not filled by these it remains a political vacuum, densely populated by individuals disoriented by the din of contradictory noises that give much scope for violence and little or no opportunity for argument (Bauman, 2001/2002, p. 12).

John Dewey hoped that thanks to the communication of ideas, the Great Society would become a Great Community, and wondered

> under what conditions can the Great Society come closest and most vital to the position of a Great Community, thus taking shape in genuinely democratic societies and in a genuinely democratic state? Under what conditions can the emergence of the Public from its eclipse be reasonably represented? (Dewey, 1927/1971, p. 123).

I am not sure that the communication of ideas is sufficient, although the call to work for a 'good society' seems to me to be quite a good idea. Perhaps, as Žižek has recently observed, today more than ever there is an absolute need for an efficient 'state' and politics that can coordinate with local communities and science, just as a firm philosophical-anthropological vision capable of designing the future of human beings outside purely mercantile logics would be indispensable (Žižek, 2020) – and here again one could hypothesise the role of education as an autonomous and creative formation of the subject that is not afraid to come to terms with its ancient and noble origins linked to *paideia, institutio*, and *Bildung.*

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