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## 'We have nothing in common': Rethinking community and the mechanisms of creating a sense of belonging

**Abstract** We live in an era of crisis for community and commonality. Our present experience, as noted by Derrida, is that of an aporia at the heart of belonging. Yet, it is in the very space torn apart by this aporia that we can try to conceive of a new sense of community and transform our way of thinking about being in common, which means the deconstruction of "Us" and of its enunciation. In the light of such a deconstruction, what makes for effective and powerful change in a struggle for emancipation, or in a protest for the recognition of one or more rights, when carried out by a collective movement or a group? This paper aims to answer that question, by seeking to investigate the conceptual and theoretical mechanisms that make a plural subject's protest or claim concrete in its quest for justice and equality, in the face of a growing and likewise concrete (or real) inequality.

**Key words:** *Belonging, community, appropriation, particular, universal, relation.*

In *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida (1997: 80) writes:

"We *belong* (this is what we take the risk of saying here) to the time of this mutation, which is precisely a harrowing tremor in the structure of the experience of *belonging*. Therefore of property. Of communal belonging and sharing: religion, family, ethnic group, nation, homeland, country, state, even humanity, love and friendship, *lovence*, be they public or private. We belong to this tremor, if that is possible; we tremble within it, belonging to it. It runs through us, and stops us dead in our tracks. We belong to it without belonging to it. Within it we hear the resonant echo of all the great discourses [...] where they assume the risk and the responsibility, but also where they *give themselves over to* the necessity of thinking and formalising, so to speak, absolute dislocation, borderless disjoining."

Derrida's description of our present human condition is disquieting, terrifying. We belong, he says, to a history that has profoundly called in doubt the category of belonging, subverting, from its roots, the idea itself of community and commonality. The destabilising element that dislocates in an absolute manner and forfeits the reference to a safe centre is the aporia at the heart of belonging: indeed, the moment that belonging is affirmed, it is immediately removed. Belonging is only given by its spectral, negative supplement.

Nevertheless, for Derrida, it is in the very space torn apart by this aporia that we can conceive of a new sense, a new axiomatic, of community: the possibility of a new and different way of thinking of community that corresponds to the crisis of belonging, and therefore doesn't repeat the ruinous history that marked the intellectual experiences of community and communism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such a possibility resides precisely in the space of aporia, in the bond of a dispossession.<sup>1</sup>

Community must no longer be understood in terms of appropriation, identification, incorporation or fusion, but instead as an experience of exteriority and relation essentially, which, as such, impedes stability, continuity, and fixity in any one of many plural identities. The connection between members of a community, externalised in relationships, overturns and transforms, therefore, the way in which the subject is understood, and even transforms the way of conceiving the *being in common*, beyond both the model offered by the dialectics of inter-subjective recognition and the canon of the sovereign Subject. Relationship is a making-in-common which thrives on the interruption of such commonality. In common amongst men there is precisely the absence of common, the nothing-in-common, the common non-belonging.

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For Derrida, all this derives, moreover, from the deconstruction of "Us" and of its enunciation, since the problem is that of seeking not to reduce differences and singularities to one sole measure, to a unified, homogeneous whole of identity, and therefore to go beyond the principle of fraternity and friendship as a symmetrical relationship of equality. What must take shape, for Derrida, is another way of thinking of community, through deconstructing the hegemonic scheme of Us, the fraternisation of our own and others, and through rejecting the paradigm of symmetry, calculation and commensurability. In other words, thinking of community as a whole of equivalences without a general equivalent, community released from the peremptory demands of calculated reciprocity, and open instead to disproportion, to the irreducible singularity of others, of all others.<sup>2</sup>

In the light of such a deconstruction, what makes for effective and powerful change in a struggle for emancipation, or in a protest for the recognition of one or more rights, when carried out by a collective movement or a group? How can the strongly oppositional, critical, antagonistic stance against the powers-that-be, when adopted by a group of individuals, be affirmed in the public arena as a moment of political identity, as an experience of creation,

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1 On Derrida's critical contribution to the recurrent debate on community and on the aporia of this community, see: Balibar 2009.

2 For further thoughts on community, beyond Derrida, the following texts are fundamental: Blanchot 1983; Nancy 1990 [1986]; 1996; Agamben 1990; R. Esposito 2003.

institution, as the form of an organising power in view of a different and more democratic order, both in state and politics?

How can we answer these questions? First of all, let me say that what I would like to do here is certainly not provide an analysis or a response that is strictly political. My intention is rather to move toward problematising, in a radical way, the topic which lies at the heart of these questions, by attempting to investigate the conceptual and theoretical mechanisms that make a plural subject's protest or claim *concrete* in its quest for justice and equality, in the face of a growing and likewise concrete (or real) inequality.

What I would like to propose here, by comparing Balibar's and Blanchot's work, is the hypothesis that a plurality can affirm its rights in the midst of inequality, not because it is compacted and formed on the basis of equality, constituting a unified, homogeneous whole of identity (for example, We Women, We Workers, We Migrants). But because, in its difference, indeed because of this very difference, such plurality contradicts this very equality, or rather, contradicts the universality of equal rights, and by so doing, plurality realises, implements and establishes universality, thereby making itself a fundamental subjectivity, an authentic political subject.

Anthropological differences, the multiple differences between humans and inhumans, in this sense, would not constitute an obstacle to the process of universalisation of the (political) subject and of citizens' rights, but the mainstay for the citizen to become a subject, indeed the horizon for the creation of an authentic political community as a system of equivalence without a general equivalent. Such a community, as Balibar emphasises, in order to be the form under which the universality of the subject, the multiplicity of differences specific to being human, and the recognition or vindication of rights are all held together, is a community which:

“...cannot be thought, therefore, either as particular or as absolutely universal, not as deriving [its] rights from rights of an anthropological ‘character’, nor as ignoring [the latter] in the name of a transcendental equivalence of all the ways human subjects have of relating to one another, nor as fixing the differences in categories, classifications, hierarchies or castes.” (Balibar 2011: 24)

In their irreducible nature – impossible to reduce to a single measure or canon – the differences show that the contradiction of exclusion and excluded is what allows universality to verify and manifest itself as such. In this sense, the differences do not represent the particular as opposed to the universal, but a dislocation at the heart itself of the universal. Such a difference, Balibar specifies, does not so much denote the difference between individuals, but rather the original lack of symmetry in relations between individuals, through which those same individuals fulfil both themselves and the human.

This means thinking of *human* and *community*, not in terms of appropriation, identification, incorporation or fusion, but as an experience essentially of exteriority, of relations, which, as such, impedes all stability, all continuity, all fixity in one of the diverse and plural identities:

“In its individual modalities, never reducible to a single model, anthropological difference is therefore not only the place of difficult identifications and normalisations; it is also the place in which originate uncomfortable overturnings of power, dislocations of belonging, counter-identifications and the invention of alternative norms that Foucault calls ‘counter-conducts.’” (Balibar 2011: 515)

The relation between humans, externalised in relationships, overturns and transforms, therefore, the way in which the human and its fulfilment are understood, and even transforms the way of conceiving the *being in common*, beyond both the model offered by the dialectics of inter-subjective recognition and the canon of the sovereign Subject.

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For Balibar, the main reference point of this “subversive” theoretical-conceptual strategy is represented by Marx. It is well known that Balibar proposed to refer to Marx’s early materialist philosophy (starting with a comment on Feuerbach) as an “ontology of relation”. And it is also well known that he intended to activate in this expression all its fundamentally oxymoronic sense, in that it wouldn’t allude so much to the fact that the essence of being human lies in *relating* or *being in relation to* – from a perspective that tends to historicise and de-essentialise, de-substantialise, the concept of human and tends to make relations the fundamental categories for understanding the real – but more to something that would turn the idea of human essence into its opposite, thereby leading to a new idea of social relations. Indeed, when Marx writes that, in reality, human essence is not an abstraction that inheres in each individual, but rather the whole of social relations (understood as open and indeterminate), not only does he transform the notion of man, revealing that the human is essentially social, but he also affirms the social, in the dissymmetry of its relations, as the condition of possibility for each individual existence and a *modus* of its ideal, universal realisation:

“In the measure to which the term ‘essence’ is applied in a ‘materialistic’ way to the anthropological problem, it even acquires a paradoxical (anti)ontological meaning through which its recognised effects are overturned: instead of ‘unifying’ and ‘totalising’ a multiplicity of attributes, it now opens up an indefinite range of metamorphoses (or transformations), in the measure to which individuals are essentially ‘modes’ of the social relations they actively produce, or through which they collectively interact with others and with natural ‘conditions.’” (Balibar 2014: 167)

For Balibar, the aporia of the Marxist formula – a formula which proposes an equivalence between the idea of human essence and social relations in a context that aims to discard, once and for all, any substantialist or essentialist definition of the human – can be sustained if one thinks in a radical way of the “fact that the human only exists in the plural” (Balibar 2014: 169). In what does such a radical position consist? Not only in believing simply that the human is given by a plurality of irreducible singularities, a homogeneous plurality, but that this plurality, in turn, pluralises itself, so to speak; in other words, it splits, differentiates, both inside and out. So we are looking at a plurality which contradicts itself the moment it is established, which withdraws all possibility of sharing the moment it places itself in common. *Relation* is a placing in common, which ultimately does not have anything in common, which experiences continually the interruption of this commonality:

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“...social relations, in a strong sense, are those which, holding humans together and preventing their ‘isolation’, also create their irreducible difference, in particular, distributing them among the various classes. This doesn’t mean that these distributions are stable or eternal or coherent. In other words, ‘social relations’ are always internally determined as differences, transformations, contradictions or conflicts, which are sufficiently radical so as to leave only the heterogeneity which they create as the common [ground]. (Balibar 2014: 169–170).”

Thus a different way of intending the universal, the common, and their relation, is outlined. A way of thinking that heads a universality which is effectively inclusive of differences (all differences) and that recognises the important role played by the latter in the constitution of appearances.

It is only because there is nothing in common among men, and only because what is in common among men is the absence of commonality, that some such thing as an intensive universal – because continually in tension, aporetic, and hence continually revocable, continually open over its own (inhuman) abyss – can be deployed and effectually operative and operating. The relation between men is therefore a relation built from and in infinite difference, in the interruption of their commonality. Not by chance Balibar refers to Blanchot in this regard; the latter also attempted to glean a way of thinking of *relation* that could withdraw from the dominion of unity and the supremacy of the subject. Indeed, Blanchot speaks of a relation between men, not in terms of unity, unification and continuity, with the consciousness of overturning the usual and reassuring ways in which we have always thought in relation to the other. Blanchot reduces these ways to two basic types: the first falls under the law of the same and of unity, and thus demands that separation be annulled, that difference be reduced to what is identical in order to affirm the truth and fullness of All and of the Subject; the second aims to bring about the same unity through the identification or confusion of the I with the Other.

It is undeniable, however, as Blanchot recognises, that every time we speak or think we always do so in virtue of such a unity. It would be absurd to claim to have done away with coherent and comprehensive thought once and for all. Nevertheless, the effort must be toward seeking to think of the Other without necessarily having recourse every time to the categories of one and the same. So it would be a matter of imagining a third relation, beyond the horizon represented by one and being.

What does the relation that withdraws from the sovereignty of the One look like? The relation not reduced to the measure of One becomes multiple, numberless, always implicated in the possibility of not being determined and so of being indeterminate, subject to the fluidity of continuous dislocation that compels the I to come out of its place and its role, and to make itself a “nomadic and anonymous [subject] in a space–abyss of resonance and condensation” (Blanchot 1993: 90–91).

In this relation the I and the Other are neither separate nor distant: in the absence of the power of the One, every measure is cancelled, and therefore every spatial collocation of the poles of relation too (what is, in fact, missing is the criterion for placing here and there, for saying, seeing and quantifying the distance). Instead, the terms of *relation* are reciprocally extraneous; an extraneousness that can no longer be defined as either separation or distance, but instead should be defined, according to Blanchot, as interruption. There is thus nothing given between men (neither a God, nor a World, nor a Nature) if not the pure evanescence and fragility of that “between”. Without doubt, the range and consequences of this theoretical gesture are remarkable. Above all, what becomes of man from such a perspective?

“... man is what is most distant from man, coming toward him as what is irreducibly Distant; in this sense, far more separated from him than he is from the limit of the Universe or than he would be from God himself. This means also that this distance represents what, from man to man, escapes human power—which is capable of anything. This relation founded by a pure lack in speech is designated there where my power ceases, there where possibility falls away. (Blanchot 1993: 92).”

The Other, with which one is in relation, places itself beyond my reach: its extraneousness cannot be assimilated to that of an object, nor to that of Nature, nor even to that of reality itself, which I can subjugate to my power at any time, including it along the horizon of my representations. Nor is its extraneousness that of a personal order, which distinguishes among men, considering them in their inter–changeability and therefore exposes them to the connection of common values.

Such extraneousness is that which comes from man, from the other, that is, in that it *is* man. As a result, for Blanchot, only man appears, along the whole

spectrum of reality, as decentred: not only does he escape from the cage of my perspective, but he is himself without his own horizon.

The third kind of relation, therefore, sets up a relationship without unity and without equality, in which it is not possible to hypothesise any communication, whether subjective (from subject to subject or from subject to object) or trans- or inter-subjective. If the Other speaks to me s/he does not do so as I would, whereas if it's me who speaks to him/her, I address someone who has no collocation, who is suspended in a caesura which cancels the vision of both duality and unity. Hence the "between" of this relation is the repudiation of any consistency of being:

"It is this fissure—this relation with the other—that we ventured to characterize as an interruption of being. And now we will add: between man and man there is an interval that would be neither of being nor of non-being, an interval borne by the Difference of speech—a difference preceding everything that is different and everything unique." (Blanchot 1993: 93)

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What Blanchot's gesture seems to inaugurate is a radical questioning of the Other/Others and their consistency of being. The third kind of relation demystifies any reduction of the other to a subjectivity, without however turning him/her into a mere object as a result. With the Other/Others it makes no sense even to ask who they are: "*Autrui* cannot designate a nature, it cannot characterize a being or an essential trait. Or, to express this crudely, *autrui* is not a certain type of man whose task it is to occupy this role — in the manner of the saints and prophets, delegates of the Most High — opposite the clan of the 'I's.'" (Blanchot 1993: 94).

Now, the absence of a measure for such a relation not only means that the other can never coincide with me, but also that I can never coincide with the other: just as the other is an other for me, so am I an other for him/her. Yet here, Blanchot warns, we mustn't intend this "doubling of non-reciprocity" in a dialectical sense, since that would end up leading the relation to its inevitable fulfilment, in the sense of its affirmation as full unity and equality. It is the subtraction of any measure and any unity which prevents the playing field of dissymmetry between the I and the Other from becoming a homogeneous field of equals: there is not just a single dissymmetry, there is not just one plane of discontinuity, but rather:

"...a double dissymmetry, a double discontinuity, as though the empty space between the one and the other were not homogeneous but polarized: as through this space constituted a non-isomorphic field bearing a double distortion, at once infinitely negative and infinitely positive, and such that one should call it neutral if it is well understood that the neutral does not annul, does not neutralize this double-signed infinity, but bears in it the way of an enigma." (Blanchot 1993: 95)

At this point, the question “Who are the others?” inevitably gives way to the question “What becomes of the human community?” since the others must respond to a relation of extraneousness between man and man, a relation without measure, always in excess. The other is merely the name affixed to something without a name, something which is completely other in that it is other, and which at a certain point in the language game is designated with the word “man”.

In the experience of the word, in which one responds to a relation of impossibility and extraneousness, one experiences man as absolutely other, and this other does not let us think of it in either transcendental or immanent terms. The other is man, it is what pertains to man, even if it is just to put him in parentheses or inverted commas: the other, not as God or Nature, but really a man, “more Other than any other thing”. The other pertains to man and displaces both the personal power of the subject and the power of the impersonal: it is the mystery of the neutral, which eludes the question of being and the question of all.

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The third kind of relation is therefore a neutral one for Blanchot, in the sense of a relation in which the one is never comprised in the other, in which the two terms of the relation itself do not form either a binomial or a unity: they are reciprocally extraneous, yet without being able to claim any privilege, indeed reinforcing the dissymmetry and discontinuity between them. It is as if, even while giving themselves up to the relation, the terms aspired to distance themselves from this very same relation, separated from it by an infinite distance and difference that can never be bridged or reversed.

What is created with this relation is, for Blanchot, an infinite dual separation: the third kind of relation is the relation of extraneousness, of separation between two terms that then separate themselves from this very separation which holds them in relation. In the relation itself, the two terms tend to offer themselves as distinct and different from the relation. The Other at stake in this relation, then, is not just one of the two terms, since it is the relation itself between the two that requires this movement of infinite separation:

“... for in this other relation, and through it, the other is for me the very presence of the other in his infinite distance: man as absolutely other and radically foreign; he who does not yield to the Same nor is exalted in the unity of the Unique. [...] It is as though in the time-space of interrelation it were necessary to think under a double contradiction; to think the Other first as the distortion of a field that is nevertheless continuous, as the dislocation and the rupture of discontinuity— and then as the infinite of a relation that is without terms and as the infinite termination of a term without relation.” (Blanchot 1993: 99)



These last words of Blanchot's recall Balibar's operation, consisting, as we have seen, in the possibility of achieving a community without a "transcendental equivalent". What these two thinkers seem to share is the intention no longer to recognise in the other something which a common measure, the belonging to a common space, maintains in a relation of continuity and unity with myself, thereby reducing its singularity. The relation, instead, forms in the separation, the interval, the interruption. To the word, in Blanchot's case, to the political vindication, in Balibar's case, does not fall the task of eliminating this anomaly, but of containing it as a dislocation, keeping it as such without saying, absorbing or normalising it. Sustaining the aporia, living in the dislocation given by the differential of subjectivity does not mean fatalistic resignation to a time of silence and passivity, but rather opening oneself up to an authentic transformation of man and of his access to the universal that can truly take difference on board:

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"But let us understand that the arrest here is not necessarily or simply marked by silence, by a blank or a gap (this would be too crude), but by a change in the form or the structure of language [...]. A change such that to speak (to write) is to cease thinking solely with a view to unity, and to make the relations of words an essentially dissymmetrical field governed by discontinuity; as though, having renounced the uninterrupted force of a coherent discourse, it were a matter of drawing out a level of language where one might gain the power not only to express oneself in an intermittent manner, but also to allow intermittence itself to speak: a speech that, non-unifying, is no longer content with being a passage or a bridge—a non-pontificating speech capable of clearing the two shores separated by the abyss, but without filling in the abyss or reuniting its shores: a speech without reference to unity." (Blanchot 1993: 103–104)

English translation by Lisa Adams

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Đuzi Strumielo

### **„Nemamo ništa zajedničko“: Promišljanje zajednice i mehanizmi stvaranja osećaja pripadnosti**

#### **Apstrakt**

Živimo u dobu krize zajednice i zajedničkog. Naše sadašnje iskustvo, kako je to primetio Derida, jeste iskustvo aporie u srcu pripadanja. No, svejedno, upravo u prostoru koji je ova aporija razjedinila možemo pokušati da začnemo novi osećaj zajednice i transformišemo način na koji mislimo o bivanju zajedno, što pretpostavlja dekonstrukciju „Mi“ i „Mi-govora.“ Ali, u svetlu takve dekonstrukcije, šta bi bila efektna i moćna promena koju bi doneo neki kolektivni pokret ili neka grupa koja se bori za emancipaciju ili protestuje zarad priznanja prava? Ovaj rad stremi odgovoru na to pitanje pokušajem da se istraže pojmovni i teorijski mehanizmi koji konkretizuju protest ili zahtev pluralnog subjekta u njegovoj potrazi za pravdom i jednakošću, nasuprot rastućoj i, takođe, konkretnoj (ili realnoj) nejednakosti.

**Ključne reči:** Pripadanje, zajednica, prisvajanje, partikularno, univerzalno, odnos.