

# Communities in Question: Sociality and Solidarity in Nancy and Blanchot

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In his early essays "Violence and Metaphysics" and "The Ends of Man", Jacques Derrida evoked a "community of the question" when he called for a fundamental questioning of the being of the "we" in the West. This demand was later formulated by Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe as the philosophical interrogation of the political (*le politique*), in distinction from the question of politics (*la politique*). This essay begins by arguing that what is at stake in this distinction is the very possibility of politics that is otherwise foreclosed. It then explores Nancy's interrogation of *le politique* in *The Inoperative Community*, and compares his response to Maurice Blanchot's response in *The Unavowable Community*. It is argued that both deconstructions of "community" depict a certain sociality that corresponds to Derrida's call—a "communality" beyond or radically other than the traditional model of community as formed by sovereign individuals and as forming the sovereign state. Where they differ is that Blanchot finds the ethical relation of the "unavowable" community on the radical interruption of ontology signaled by death, whereas Nancy casts ontology itself in an ethical register, and thereby allows a certain solidarity to emerge as well.

*At the very moment when there is no longer a "command post" from which a "socialist vision" could put forward a subject of history or politics, or, in an even broader sense, when there is no longer a "city" or "society" out of which a regulative figure could be modeled, at this moment being-many, shielded from all intuition, from all representation or imagination, presents itself with all the acuity of its question, with all the sovereignty of its demand (Jean-Luc Nancy 2000, p. 43).*

## Introduction

When Derrida first suggested in "Violence and Metaphysics" that the thought of Emmanuel Levinas "can make us tremble", he had in mind the way in which ethics puts the very nature of philosophy, the very nature of the "is," into question, because it challenges the way in which we represent ourselves as "being" in the West (1978, p. 82). Such a question unsettles ontology, which is to say, it

unsettles the very meaning of “being” in the Greek idiom of philosophy—that idiom which is, as Derrida says, the only possible one there is (1978, p. 81).<sup>1</sup> The question of philosophy itself, the question of philosophy’s life and death, is thus as fundamentally *philosophical* as can be (it is the question of the “essence” of philosophy).<sup>2</sup> For this reason, it is the only question capable of founding “a community of the question” (Derrida 1978, pp. 79, 80). At the same time, however, insofar as this question provokes “us” as a community to tremble, it is also one that implicates the essence of the *political*, as I shall go on to show. This is just why, as Derrida drew to a conclusion in that essay of 1964, he queried, “Are we Greeks? Are we Jews? But who, we?” (1978, p. 153), just as four years later (at the moment of crisis in philosophical anthropology), at the very end or limit of his essay “The Ends of Man”, Derrida asked again the limit question of “man” (as such), the political question *par excellence*: “But who, we?” (1987, p. 152).

Yet despite the fact that Derrida’s point in 1964 was thus already that, above all, “through this discipline... an injunction is announced: the question must be maintained. As a question” (1978, p. 80), and despite the fact that this ethico-political injunction of philosophy goes at once to the essence of the philosophical and to the essence of the political, it remains that the political implications of deconstruction have long been a source of disappointment, contention, and dispute. For many, it remains uncertain just what the political nature of “a community of the question” is: just what kind sociality and what solidarity might there be found. It is by no means even clear that the name “community” would still apply at all.

Indeed, since he first evoked a “community” of the question, Derrida has repeatedly expressed reservations about the term. In the late 1990s, for example, Maurizio Ferraris suggested that if, following Kierkegaard, it is true that the “mad” moment of the decision renders nonsensical the dream of an organic, ethical community, it might be better to think of a “‘community of the question’ or of interrogation—a community of interpretation and allegoresis”, instead. Derrida’s response was this:

1. Derrida elaborates as follows: “As is well known, this [claim, that “the entirety of philosophy is conceived on the basis of its Greek source”] amounts neither to an occidentalism, nor to a historicism. It is simply that the founding concepts of philosophy are primarily Greek, and it would not be possible to philosophize, or to speak philosophically, outside this medium” (1978, p. 81; internal note omitted). While an engagement with this claim is beyond the scope of this essay, it is important to note that Robert Bernasconi has challenged Derrida’s position. He asks, “does not deconstruction tend at a certain moment to be threatened by nostalgia for so-called Western metaphysics, securing Western philosophy’s identity at the very moment that it questions it?” (1993, p. 18). Bernasconi may well be right; the question is one that bears closer scrutiny than it can be given here. For further discussion, see also Bernasconi (1992, 1997) and Balslev (1997). For a compelling and nuanced discussion of why one might question the goodness of embracing alterity and the multicultural ethos that comes with it, see Rudi Visker’s “Is Ethics Fundamental? Questioning Levinas on irresponsibility” (2003).

2. The term “essence” is used here cautiously; its precise meaning is specified below.

I would have far fewer difficulties and reservations in accepting the image of a community that does not constitute itself on the basis of a contemporaneity of presences but rather through the opening produced by what you have called allegoresis—that is, the interpretation of a text not given, not closed in on itself, an interpretation that transforms the text. We would have, then, a community of writing and reading... (Derrida & Ferraris 2001, p. 24; cf. Thurschwell n.d., p. 3 n.8)

Thus, with respect to the “communities” of Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) and Maurice Blanchot (1988) in particular, Derrida remarks that while he continues to wonder “why call them communities”, he has “no qualms” about them provided one takes precautions to ensure their disassociation from “the ‘common’ [*commun*], the as-one [*comme-un*]” (2001, p. 25). For example, he says, “when Blanchot himself...affirms both the ‘unavowable community’ and that the relation to the other has to be an interruption, then we have a community that does right by interruption!” (2001, p. 25). And so too, I will argue, do we have a community that does right by “disparity and dissension” when Nancy affirms both an “inoperative community”, a “community without essence” that “interrupts myth”, and that the other is s/he to whom one is always “‘posed’ in exteriority”, or “exposed” (1991, pp. xxxix, xxxvii). Both are versions, as I shall show, of what a community that accentuates singularity might be.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond Derrida’s reluctant acceptance of the word with these provisions and precautions, however, I argue in the first place that there is a more substantive reason to use the term “community”. It is that precisely insofar as deconstruction is “political” but is not *a* politics, so the “inoperative” and “unavowable” communities described by Nancy and Blanchot *are* “communal”, but are not communities as such. For these deconstructions of community reveal what is at stake in the distinction *between* writing as “the literary” (the “merely” rhetorical, fictional or textual) on the one hand, and speech as the political (as the onto-logical, the literal or the real)—as in the classical ideal of community as the common being of the “us” (the “*comme-un*”)—on the other. As Bill Readings argues, what is at stake is politics itself, precisely insofar as the “real” is that which falsely presents itself as beyond the order of thought (1989, p. 230). What deconstruction is to the writing-speech distinction in general therefore, so I argue community-in-question is specifically to the immanent communal totality: an unrepresentable, unavowable, inoperative “arche-sociality” to come, a “trace,” (t)here at the heart of community (see Nancy 1991, p. 71). A *certain* sociality is, thus, thereby inscribed.

In the second place, however, I argue there are significant differences between Nancy and Blanchot that should be heeded as well. Specifically, whereas Blanchot understands being as lack *against* an anterior ethical relation—a relation which is itself understood as “interruption”—Nancy arguably appreciates the significance

3. Giorgio Agamben, whose text I do not have the space to consider here, provides an interesting and important counter-point to Nancy’s analysis in particular. For example, one might well say that Agamben too “affirms both” a community “to come”, and that the relation to the other is “mediated not by any condition of belonging...but by belonging itself.” See *The Coming Community* (1993, p. 85).

of the relationship *between* ontology and ethics that Derrida exposed in his original reading of Levinas (Derrida 1978). Derrida showed there that trembling is not provoked strictly from the outside, because there can *be* no absolute outside. Rather, the ethical (or Hebraic) challenge to Hellenism that issues from the thought of Levinas marks, so to speak, philosophy's (own) incapacity to demarcate itself *from* its own outside. In other words, Derrida's reading is that the ethical challenge marks "philosophically" the margins of philosophy's own (im)possibility, precisely by showing that philosophy (as Greek ontology) cannot be definitively distinguished *from* an (Hebraic, ethical) alterity that haunts it. This also means, however, that neither can alterity be distinguished absolutely from the philosophical language of ontology through which it makes itself heard. On this logic, it follows that the only "communality" (in its arche-sense) that can do justice *to* politics is one that thinks being itself in an ethical register as does Nancy's, rather than one such as Blanchot's, which holds these as separate. To maintain the question of the being of the "we" as a question in the way that Nancy does in particular, therefore—that is, in terms of the way in which the commonality of the "we" is undone by a communal notion of being-with that at once exceeds ontology in the direction of ethics and exceeds ethics in the direction of ontology—is not thus only to undertake an inquiry into the "essence" of the political by re-marking the margins of politics' own impossibility *as* community. It is also to express a mode of solidarity in a very peculiar, *certain* sense of that term.

With respect to any deconstructive re-thinking of political community, it is necessary to emphasize that while such efforts will never resemble *a* politics—any more than deconstruction in general can be translated directly into a political program or platform—this does not render them *apolitical* (merely textual or philosophical) either. I therefore begin with an explication of the relationship between what Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe refer to as "*la*" and "*le politique*"; that is, between "politics" and "the political". I then turn in section two to Nancy's and Blanchot's singular attempts to re-think community in the wake of its deconstruction. While community is "essentially" in question in both texts, I argue in section three that insofar as Nancy appreciates the mutual contamination of ethics and ontology, he offers a more adequate interrogation of community than does Blanchot. In Nancy's thought, I conclude, the ethico-political question of community is fully maintained.

### Le/La Politique or, the Politics of Politics

In 1980, some 12 years after his paper on "The Ends of Man" was first delivered, a conference entitled "*Les fins de l'homme: à partir du travail de Jacques Derrida*"<sup>4</sup> was convened at Cérisy, France to sort out at least some of the

4. Various translations of the sub-title seem somewhat unfortunate: "Spinoffs of the Work of Jacques Derrida" (see Fraser 1984, p. 127), or alternatively, "Taking Off from the Work of Jacques Derrida" (see Ingram 1988, p. 94).

questions that had long plagued those following the notorious career of deconstruction ever since the late 1960s. As Nancy Fraser lists them, these concern above all the political implications and significance of deconstruction. As she puts it, "Is [it] possible—and desirable—to articulate a deconstructive politics? ... Is it possible to rethink the political from a Derridean standpoint and what might such an effort look like?" (1984, pp. 127-128). While this issue may not have been satisfactorily resolved at C erisy, it was certainly treated to intense interrogation and development. Most significantly, it was at this conference that Lacoue-Labarthe, responding to a specific challenge concerning the appropriateness of trying to think through the political implications of deconstruction through a Heideggerian lens, proffered what was to be a seminal distinction between "*le*" and "*la*" *politique* (see Fraser 1984, p. 134 and following). Specifically, and by analogy here with Nancy's own invocation of Heidegger's distinction between ethics and its non- or pre-ethical condition of possibility, Lacoue-Labarthe articulated a difference between the question of *politics* understood as position-taking and contestation on the one hand, and the question of *the political*, understood as a philosophical interrogation of what he called (following Derrida) its "essence"—a term which might be more carefully rendered as its necessary (but impossible) suppositions, its own *diff erance*—on the other.

Most importantly, this difference between *le* and *la* should not be construed as one between a putatively pure "philosophy" and a putatively pure "politics" as is implied by Fraser (1984), but nor should it be construed along the lines of even a deconstructed version of the classical distinction between "essence and appearance" either, as Readings suggests by way of rebuttal (1989, pp. 242-243 n. 31). Ironically, Readings himself makes clear why neither of these formulations, Fraser's or his own, will do. Readings' insight is that Fraser is mistaken to reduce this difference between *le* and *la politique* to one between a disengaged deconstructive theory (*qua* philosophy) on the one hand, and an engaged political practice on the other, because a deconstruction of the theory-practice, textual-literal difference reveals precisely "the figural status of the literal" (1989, p. 230). From this it follows in the first place that to suggest that deconstruction can or cannot be "translated" into a political practice, or that it is or is not willing to "dirty its hands in political struggle" (Fraser 1984, p. 150; Critchley 1992, p. 215), is to presuppose that there are two distinct sites *between which* the practice of deconstruction can be conveyed. This is to overlook that it is the interrogation of the very "facticity" (Critchley 1992, p. 201) or "empirical manifestation" (Ingram 1988, p. 97) of politics (*la politique*) to begin with—the question of its very "obviousness" (Fraser 1984, p. 136)—that the inquiry into *le politique* entails. The aim of such an inquiry is precisely to reveal that the appeal to a real, nonmetaphorical, literal and hence natural voice is itself an order of language that serves injustice by providing an alibi for the way things "genuinely" are (Readings 1989, pp. 231, 241 n. 18).

If Readings' point is thus that in each of these formulations, Fraser's, Critchley's and Ingram's, "appearance" is misrecognized as simply the translation or

continuation of a deeper, prior “essence”, however, it does not follow from this that what one ought to do instead is to insist on a politics that is “*divorced* from any grounding on political essence” by thinking “the difference of the political from politics in terms of a *disjuncture* of essence from appearance” such that a passage “from the theoretical to the practical or from the global to the specific” is ‘*precluded*’ (Readings 1989, p. 243, n. 31, emphases added). As Robert Bernasconi has remarked, this defense of the distinction “is ultimately doomed to fail because it is deconstruction above all that has shown how the ontic [being in its specificity - SG] invariably ‘contaminates’ ontological purity”, or what one might call Being as such (1993, p. 19 n. 3). Indeed, Readings himself makes clear that to undertake a deconstruction of politics, which is to say, to interrogate philosophically the “essence of the political”, is precisely to render *undecidable* the a priori and the a posteriori, the essential and the apparent, the philosophical and the political, *difference* on which each of these formulations, including Readings’ own, depend. Undecidability emerges when a question is turned upon itself, for the question that asks after the very possibility of the question, the question that asks, “what is the reason for reason?” or, “what is the political essence of politics?” is one which is no longer either inside or outside the limits of its own interrogation. This is the undecidable limit, the margin, of the onto-logical enterprise itself.

It is at precisely this juncture, when an essential difference is rendered “essentially” undecidable, that there emerges the need for those quasi-transcendental terms for which deconstruction has become so well known. Just as neither the “trace”, the “supplement”, the “*pharmakon*”, “*arche-writing*” nor *différance* themselves determine any *thing* but rather figure deferred and differential relations *between* determinate sites—between presence and absence, necessary and accidental, cure and poison, speech and writing, and so on—and, thereby, render these distinct meanings possible at all, so the “essence” of the political, I submit, must be taken in this way as well. In other words, to suggest as Derrida did in “The Ends of Man” that there is an “essential belonging-to-one-another (*co-appartenance*) of the political and the philosophical” (cited in Fraser 1984, p. 136)—the remark upon which Lacoue-Labarthe had seized—is to suggest that there is no “essence” as such at *either* the philosophical or the political site, because each *exceeds* itself in the direction of the other.<sup>5</sup> It is for this reason that Derrida describes his own undertaking as an “*excessively* philosophical gesture: a gesture that is philosophical and, at the same time, in excess of the philosophical” (Derrida & Ferraris 2001, p. 4, original emphasis). So understood, the philosophical interrogation of the essence of the political is neither a (purely) *theoretical* reflection on a (purely) political *practice* (Fraser, *et al.*), nor is it an *essential* gesture divorced from manifest *appearance* (Readings). Rather, it is an interrogation *of* the possibility of politics itself—there “within that fragile

5. In “The Ends of Man”, Derrida began thus: “Every philosophical colloquium necessarily has a political significance. And not only due to that which has always linked the essence of the philosophical to the essence of the political” (1987, p. 125). For an interesting if contentious discussion of Lacoue-Labarthe’s reading of these remarks, see Fraser (1984, p. 136).



moment when the question is not yet determined enough for the hypocrisy of an answer to have already initiated itself beneath the mask of the question" (Derrida 1978, p. 80).

From this point of view, the distinction between *le* and *la politique* can be seen to build directly on the implications of Derrida's original announcement of the injunction to maintain the political-philosophical question of "our" being (and, thus, the question of the "us") as a question. This task was to become the guiding theme of the short-lived (1980-1984) *Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political* subsequently established and co-directed by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe. What is at stake in that undertaking is "essentially" philosophical because it is essentially political (the ethical question of our relation "founds" in an originary way the Being of community in the West), and it is "essentially" political because it is essentially philosophical (the ontological question of our being as-one [*comme-un*] "founds" in an originary way the communal, ethico-political *polis*). This idea of the "co-belonging" of philosophy and politics—what one might call "essence under erasure" because it signals an "essential" or "fundamental" interruption of the essence of the as-one or fundament—is, I now want to show, the *political* dimension of deconstruction that Nancy has endeavored to think.

### Communities of the Question

Notwithstanding the brief existence of the Centre itself, it would appear that Nancy has been doing nothing but researching the question of *le politique*, nothing but maintaining in an absolutely singular way the "essentially" political question of the social being of "man" (but who, we?), ever since. Most notable with respect to this issue of the conditions of possibility of the political—the issue, that is, of political community as such, the issue of human being as social being—are particularly those more recent writings in which Nancy develops the thought of being as "compearance", that co-appearance without which, he argues, singular beings cannot come to 'be' (1991, 1992, 2000), and which renders the community—happily for Nancy—"inoperative".

The core of Nancy's, *The Inoperative Community* (1991 [1986]) was first written in the spring of 1982, and was published as an article ("*La communauté désœuvrée*") in the spring of 1983 (see Bernasconi 1993, p. 5 and Nancy 1991, p. 41-42n.). Interestingly, the word "inoperative" is the term chosen by Nancy's translators to signify Blanchot's neologism, "*désœuvrement*", which Nancy takes up centrally in this book, and which means something like unworking, or worklessness. More precisely, however, the term *désœuvrement* implies a certain activeness that this last option, worklessness, would seem to pacify (see Joris, in Blanchot 1988, p. xxviii, n. 13). On the one hand, inoperativeness, or *désœuvrement*, is opposed in a way to *oeuvre*, in the sense that community, Nancy insists, "cannot arise from the domain of work", nor should we understand as a work, an object, or a product. He continues,

One does not produce it, one experiences or one is constituted by it as the experience of finitude. Community understood as a work or through its works would presuppose that the common being, as such, be objectifiable and producible (in sites, persons, buildings, discourses, institutions, symbols; in short, in subjects) (Nancy 1991, p. 31).

But neither, Nancy insists on the other hand, is community to be understood as a kind of passive idleness, or simple worklessness. He says, "Community is given to us—or we are given and abandoned to the community: a gift to be renewed and communicated, it is not a work to be done or produced. But it is a task, which is different—an infinite task at the heart of finitude" (1991, p. 35).

Nancy's question, then, is this: "how can the community without essence (the community that is neither 'people' nor 'nation,' neither 'destiny nor 'generic humanity,' etc.) be presented as such? That is, what might a politics be that does not stem from the will to realize an essence?" (1991, pp. xxxix, xl). His answer is tentative and suggestive: in our political programs, he argues, "the properly 'common' character of community disappears"—that is, "the *in* of being-*in*-common", or "the *with* or the *together* that defines it" (1991, p. xxxix). In contrast to the immanentism of the subject and of the common—or, as he also calls it, the generalized *totalitarianism* (1991, p. 3) in which the individual is absolutely closed off from all relation, and in which being itself is absolute in the form of "the Idea, History, the Individual, the State, Science, the Work of Art, and so on" (1991, p. 4)—Nancy proposes that singular beings only exist in an originary "sociality", insofar as "finite being always presents itself 'together,' hence severally" (1991, p. 28).

This idea of singularity must be rigorously distinguished from individualism; as Nancy says, "one cannot make a world with simple atoms... There has to be an inclination or an inclining from one toward the other, of one by the other, or of one to the other" (1991, p. 3). In a world, we co-appear; we "compear" (1991, p. 28; cf. Nancy 1992). Therefore, in the place of communion (one body, one subject, one sovereign)—which if it were actually realizable would be death (1991, p. 12)—there is communication at the origin of community: that which is (essentially) nothing, but which consists of the exposure to an outside, in the sharing with the other at the limits, the borders, of finite being. As Nancy puts it, "finitude itself *is* nothing; it is neither a ground, nor an essence, nor a substance. But it appears, it presents itself, it exposes itself, and thus it *exists* as communication" (1991, p. 28). And insofar as there is, thus, no work to be produced by or as community, "the political" would signify a community disposed to sharing, a community conscious of its constitutive, communicative experience, a community in which the *as such*, the *what is*, the *work* which produces the common, is withdrawn or suspended (1991, pp. 10-11, 40).

It is important to remark, at this juncture, that the language of precedence that Nancy mobilizes when he refers to "an originary or ontological sociality" (Nancy 1991, p. 28, 2000, p. 47) must be taken in a very particular way; as discussed earlier, it would be misleading to suggest that an interrogation of the politics of politics, of the condition of possibility of the political, leads to the



revelation of a more essential, prior essence which is later to appear. Rather, when Nancy speaks of the “clinamen”—that inclining or leaning of one towards (an)other without which there is no *one* and no *us* (1991, pp. 3-4)—what is at stake is the way in which the very possibility of a *socius* is based on what Derrida has called an “*anterior* affirmation of being-together in the allocution” (1988, p. 637).

Most significantly, this anterior relation is no distinct *thing*, nor should it be taken as *prior* in a chronological sense. As Derrida puts it, as soon as we have begun to speak we *already* have been caught up in “the relation to the Other prior to any organized *socius*”. But this responsibility with which we are already invested by the Other, that which comes “before” autonomy, also “*exceed[s]*” it—“that is, succeed[s] it, survive[s] it, and indefinitely surpass[es] it”. Thus, he continues, one would have to “deform the oppositional logic” whereby autonomy and heteronomy might simply be opposed (Derrida 1988, pp. 633-634). One would have to understand the anterior relation, instead, in terms of the “temporal torsion” of “an undeniable future anterior” (1988, pp. 637-638)—in terms, that is, of that paradoxical disruption of the unity of the present that is signified by that which (in the future), once, *will (and must) have been* the case. This undeniable future anterior is what Derrida calls “the absolute of an unrepresentable past as well as future... [the absolute] of traces that one can only ever deny by summoning them into the light of phenomenal presence” (1988, pp. 637-638).

Similarly for Nancy, the “inoperative community” is at once the trace *which will have made possible* the existence of the social as such, and that which will have withdrawn or been denied in order that community may be (1991, p. 31). In other words, insofar as singular beings exist in an “originary sociality” because “finite being always presents itself ...severally”, it follows for Nancy that a singular being “has the precise structure and nature of a being of writing, of a ‘literary’ being: it resides only in the communication—which does not commune—of its advance and its retreat” (1991, p. 78). Thus, he insists again in *Being Singular Plural*, “the clinamen is not something else, another element outside of the atoms; it is not in addition to them; it is the ‘more’ of their exposition. Being many, they cannot but incline or decline; they are ones in relation to others” (2000, pp. 39-40). The “inoperative” community as arche-community—what Nancy calls “the origin of community or the originary community” (1991, p. 33)—is thus that spacing (arche-writing) that will have “produced” community as such, but which itself can never appear (it is not something *else*).<sup>6</sup> And this, I submit, is now very close to what Derrida indicated when he spoke of the possibility of a community that constitutes itself through “an interpretation that transforms the text... a community of writing and reading” (cited above). Indeed, it is precisely because in Nancy’s view “an ethics and a politics of discourse and writing are evidently implied” that he raises with the “clumsy expression” the question of “literary communism” (1991, p. 26). This phrase is meant to capture

6. Compare Nancy: “If politics is again to mean something, and mean something new, it will only be in touching this ‘essentiality’ of existence which is itself its own ‘essence’, that is to say, which has no essence, which is ‘arch-essentially’ exposed to that very thing” (1992, p. 390).

just that arche-writing (the literary) that the community in its “essential” or originary sense of communality (communism) (*is*). This is, in Nancy’s thought, just where a community of the question might be found.

Significantly, in his persistent and relentless effort to interrogate the “essence” of the political, Nancy joins company not only with Derrida, but also as I have indicated with Blanchot. Each of them takes up and elaborates upon the political-philosophical theme of community in a way that was first radicalized by Georges Bataille, whose writings during the latter half of the 1930s are an attempt to come to terms with what Adam Thurschwell characterizes as “the disillusioning communitarian disasters of fascism and Soviet Communism” (n.d., p. 3). Thus, as do Derrida and Nancy, Blanchot also evokes what one might call a *certain* community, a *certain* sociality that is to come (that is *not yet* determined). The three thoughts are therefore extremely closely aligned.

Indeed, on the very heels of the 1983 publication of Nancy’s “*La communauté désœuvrée*”, Blanchot published a text called *La communauté inavouable* (*The Unavowable Community*, 1988 [1983]), the first essay of which takes its title, “The Negative Community”, from Bataille, and which is presented as a refinement of Nancy’s own reading of Bataille. To Nancy’s notion of singular being, being that is finite in the sense that it is different from itself, reliant on the other with whom it co-appears and thus lacking in absolute (in infinite) identity, Blanchot offers his own view of being as “ecstasy”. There are close resonances with Nancy here: the idea that ecstasy is nothing if it does not communicate itself, the notion that there could be no experience at all if the event were limited to the single individual, the notion that insofar as experience is social, it exposes us to the limits of what we are—ecstasy is the experience of the self outside, or beside, itself—and the notion, above all, that community is therefore constituted by a principle of insufficiency and incompleteness.

According to Bernasconi, however, there are important differences as well (1993, p. 6). For Nancy, death signifies the impossibility of making a work out of community or a work out of death, precisely because death, our finitude, our mortality, disrupts the (ontological) project of fusion (Bernasconi 1993, p. 10). In contrast, Blanchot commissions the theme of death for the service of ethics, specifically, for the service of the ethical relation to the other (as per Levinas). What “calls me into question most radically”, he writes, is “my presence for another who absents himself by dying... . [T]o take upon myself another’s death as the only death that concerns me, this is what puts me beside myself, this is the only separation that can open me, in its very impossibility, to the Openness of a community” (1988, p. 9). Death, therefore, “is what founds community” (1988, p. 9)—not in the sense that “community can confer a non-mortality” (an immortality), nor in the sense that in community I am raised up, sublated, to a greater good (Blanchot 1988, p. 10; cf Bernasconi 1993, p. 8) as, for example, in the Hegelian state. Rather, death founds community for Blanchot in the sense that the death of the other takes me out of myself and thus exposes me to the radical alterity of an outside that thought cannot master (1988, p. 12). The community for Blanchot therefore remains un-sayable, un-transmittable,

un-avowable, though it is no less profound, no less the very possibility of my being, for that. On the contrary, it is precisely the exposure to an exterior that produces me in relation to the other—to what is beyond my “self”. Thus whereas Nancy’s arche-community (as spacing) interrupts the unity of community’s ontological myth, Blanchot affirms (as Derrida has noticed) that the ethical relation to the Other of the arche-community is itself an interruption (cited above).

This difference is important, and I shall return to it shortly. For the moment, however, I want only to note that, in either case, these authors produce a deconstructive understanding of “community” in the sense that both are particularly attentive to the idea that “community” as “communality” undoes identity and commonality as such and that, for this very reason, opens—in an “essential” way, so to speak—the possibility of politics. The effort of both thus lies on the side of *le* rather than *la politique*. And, to the extent that they articulate the community-in-question, I submit, they comprise a community of the question; they articulate as a community precisely that communality-as-trace—that spacing, or that writing—that is always already (t)here whenever we say “community”. In both cases, therefore, what is revealed by the interrogation of the political, the radical questioning of the being of the “we”, is its deconstructive opening. Community as communality is the pre-originary *socius* which unsettles being and (*is*), thus, the trace of community—(*is*) the arche-community (*if*, as Nancy says, “one still wants to call this ‘community’” [2000, p. 25])—without which politics as community is not possible at all.

### Splitting the Ethics-Ontology Difference

What these texts offer is a deconstructive take on community that is radically different from any classic conception of the community as formed by sovereign individuals, or as forming a sovereign state. At stake in them each, I have argued, is not *a* politics but rather an interrogation of the political—a questioning that is itself “communal” or “social” in a certain sense of those terms. For Blanchot, for example, the choice produced by the twin ills of “fascism and bureaucratic Stalinism” (Joris, in Blanchot 1988, p. xv) explicitly excludes the appeal to political sovereignty altogether. What emerges instead is a choice between, on the one hand, what Blanchot envisions as the possibility of “a completely different relationship” and “another form of society which one would hardly dare call a ‘community’” or (/and), on the other hand, the acceptance of the name “community” together with the acknowledgment that the very concept must be questioned as the indicator of an inevitable absence (see Bernasconi 1993, p. 7). Both options suggest a fundamental interrogation of the political; however, they do lead in significantly different directions.

To a certain extent, this choice captures the difference between Nancy and Blanchot sketched out above. But it is not simply a difference, as Bernasconi would have it, between Blanchot’s Levinasian “‘discourse of dissymmetry and the Other’” on the one hand, and Bataille’s and Nancy’s Heideggerian discourse

on “the absence of community”, a more or less strictly ontological discourse, on the other (Bernasconi 1993, esp. pp. 7-12). As we have already seen, from the point of view of deconstruction the “Hebraic” and the “Hellenistic” do not stand so firmly apart, nor are either Blanchot or Nancy so firmly committed one way or the other. On the contrary, I submit, both understand (although arguably Nancy does so more clearly than Blanchot) that it is precisely when the ethical and the ontological *are* distinguished in a radical way—such that, for example, ethics is understood *either* metaphysically as the “practical effectuation of the political” (Fraser 1984, p. 135), *or* “ethically” (in a Levinasian sense) as ontology’s absolute, radical outside (as “essence” divorced from appearance, for example)—that the political purchase of deconstruction is missed.

This is, arguably, just why Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy maintained at Cérisy that a retreat from and re-tracing of (*retrait*) of the “essence” of the political is demanded in the face of its withdrawal (*retrait*) from every aspect of social life. For on their Heideggerian analysis, as Critchley, Fraser and others have explained, the contemporary world is one in which politics dominates completely—one in which everything is political (Critchley 1992, p. 206)—because philosophy conceived *as* a distinct domain has now been “completed and effectuated in... the great ‘enlightening’, progressive, secular-eschatological discourse of Revolution as humanity’s self-reappropriation and self-actualization” (Fraser 1984, p. 139). This closure of the political in Western liberal democracies is tantamount to what they call a “general” or a “soft” totalitarianism which, while not characterized by death camps or secret police, is nonetheless continuous with the specific or “hard” form of totalitarianism experienced in the former Soviet Union (Critchley 1992, pp. 206-210). In other words, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe diagnosed a “common logic” and “potential for convergence” (Ingram 1988, p. 98) between liberal democracies and totalitarian regimes by virtue of how, in both cases, the possibility of alterity, the possibility of transcendence and, thus the possibility of a contestation of power, are utterly foreclosed. It was for this reason above all that, they submitted, a retreat from politics and a retracing (*retrait*) of the essence of the political was not only justified but required.

To be sure, the distinction between philosophy and politics that allows for this “soft” form of totalitarian politics (*la politique*) is not strictly analogous to the distinction at issue now, between ethics and ontology, *within* that interrogation Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy call *le politique*. Nonetheless, I suggest, the danger at stake is the same. For it is by virtue of the putative difference between a pure philosophy (textuality) and a pure politics (real) that philosophy can be completed as the closure of politics such that “there is, then, no transgression which is unrecuperable, which cannot be reinstalled within the [metaphysical - SG] closure it tries to exceed” (Fraser 1984, p. 131). Similarly, I submit, to appeal to the *absolute* alterity of ethics outside the onto-logical “adventure” (to coin Derrida’s term [1978, 81]) is to risk reinstating the completion of the ethical and the closure of ontology in such a way as to re-conceal the very opening *to* thought, the very question *of* being-in-relation, the very essence of the political it is necessary to explore.

To claim either that ethics as radical alterity prefigures ontology (that philosophical essence *qua* the ethical prefigures political appearance *qua* the ontological) or that “politics takes place on a social terrain that is irreducibly factual, empirical, and contingent” (Critchley 1992, p. 216) is thus to miss the most crucial political lesson of deconstruction of all; namely, that *there is no possibility of clean hands* because there is no prior, pre-violent, unadulterated place to stand. This is why, in response to Levinas’ appeal to the non-violent purity of ethics against the “imperialism” or “totalitarianism” of the concept (see Derrida 1978, pp. 85, 91), Derrida had already argued in 1964 that “every philosophy of nonviolence can only choose the lesser violence within an *economy of violence*” (1978, p. 313, n.21). Absent this choice, he asks, “what would ‘exteriority as the essence of Being’ *mean*” (1978, p. 141, emphasis mine)? He writes,

To overlook the irreducibility of this last violence, is to revert—within the order of philosophical discourse which one cannot *seek to reject*, except by risking the *worst violence*—to an infinitist dogmatism in pre-Kantian style, one which does not pose the question of responsibility for its own finite philosophical discourse (Derrida 1978, p. 130, original emphasis).

This is the lesson Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe set out at Cérisy to heed: that “domination works by denying its politics, by establishing its particular politics as an empirical or prepolitical real, so that domination is invisible in that it takes place before what is named as the political” (Readings 1989, p. 230). But this is no less true with respect to the attempt to retreat from politics to a site that is absolutely exterior to the conceptual (ontological) domain, the site of a pure unavowable ethicity, than it is of the appeal to the “obvious” facticity of the literal, non-metaphorical, empirical “real”. In both cases, what is denied is that violence and domination are ineradicable insofar as meaning and signification, politics and philosophy, are possible at all. As Derrida rightly insists, “there is no phrase which is indeterminate, that is, which does not pass through the violence of the concept” (1978, p. 147). This is why a lesser violence is the *best* one can aim for—a violence that is an avowal of violence—within an “economy of war one never escapes” as long as one is within history (Derrida 1978, pp. 117, 130, 148).

With his evocation of the “negative community” (1988)—an other *form* of community that is hospitable to the other to be sure, but nonetheless a community that *is*, in some ontological sense that is simultaneously disavowed—Blanchot himself might thus be said to opt, however ambivalently, for the former choice he identified in which what is evoked is an ecstatic experience of finitude which cannot (or dare not) be named as such. In contrast to Blanchot, Nancy does “dare” to avow “community” quite explicitly. “[T]he interruption [of myth] itself has a singular voice,” he writes, “it is the voice of community which in its way perhaps avows, without saying it, the unavowable” (1991, p. 62). Thus Nancy might be said to have opted for the latter choice, in which the name “community” is accepted and questioned at the same time. More precisely, however, I would suggest that whereas Blanchot (arguably) falls more clearly on the ethics side of what emerges in his thought as an identifiable divide, Nancy offers a

thought of community that undoes radically, at its root, the ethics-ontology contest. In his terms, “the ‘ethical’ exposes what the ‘ontological’ disposes” (2000, p. 99), which is to say that what Nancy calls, variously, being-many, being singular plural, or “the *in* of the ‘in-between’ ” (1992, p. 392), is already “beyond Being” in the Levinasian, ethical sense.

Indeed, it is fascinating to note that the language of “exposure” that is mobilized in 1996 in *Being Singular Plural* (2000) with respect to ethics was used in 1986, in *The Inoperative Community* (1991) exclusively with reference to ontology. There we find that, if communism is now the horizon that must be challenged, this is just because the horizon marks the limit of being, the limit of being “man” or “us” as such, and this limit is none other than our *exposure* to others, which is to say, it is the originary possibility of community *as* an arche-community of *others* (1991, pp. 8, 15, 25). Yet Nancy’s equivocation on the quality (ethical or ontological) of “exposure” is no mistake. On the contrary if, as I have indicated, Bernasconi places Nancy firmly on the side of ontology, while David Ingram can argue conversely that Nancy’s task is “to restore the ethical dimension to its proper pre-eminence” in political philosophy (1988, p. 97)—a reading Bernasconi ‘corrects’ (1993, p. 20, n.12)—this is just because “being is communication” (2000, p. 28), and communication *is* the exposure of the “with”, the between, the otherwise-than-being that is *shared*. To think being-with in this sense is to think ontology itself in an ethical register or, one might also say, to think ethics in an ontological register.<sup>7</sup> More specifically, being-with exceeds ontology in the direction of ethics insofar as it avows without saying our asymmetrical, heteronomous relation to others, just as it exceeds ethics in the direction of ontology insofar as that relation (is) the spacing (arche-writing) through which what *is* (will have) come(s) to “be”.

Most significantly, “being-with” for Nancy means that the one is always other-than-one *and* less-than-one in the sense that finite being is, as we have seen, lacking in infinite identity, reliant on the other with whom it necessarily co-appears. One *is*, thus, always *already* in asymmetrical relation to (an)Other. This is precisely why Nancy’s thought does implicate community, not only in terms of a certain (arche-) sociality, but in terms of a certain solidarity, an ethical relation that is beyond being, so to speak, as well. It does so, moreover, in just that interrogative, unsettled, questioning modality that Derrida originally had in mind. Nancy thus provides an answer to the question of what an “effort to rethink the political from a Derridean standpoint might look like” in such a way that responds adequately, in my view, to concerns about mobilizing the name “community” at all.

7. This reading of Nancy should thus be rigorously distinguished from Critchley’s suggestion that politics must be *mediated* ethically (1992, p. 219), from Readings’ proposal to *replace* “the traditional subject of politics with the subject of a tradition of ethical thought” (1989, p. 234), and from Ingram’s reading of *The Inoperative Community* as an ethical argument (1988, 97).



## Conclusion

Given the nature of these investigations, given the status of *le politique* as a political-philosophical interrogation of the politics of politics rather than as, itself, a politics, and given the concomitant revelation of the between, the being-with, the un(re)presentability of “the” community that emerges in the texts of Nancy and Blanchot, it is truly only of a *certain* sociality, a *certain* solidarity, that one might speak at all. For both of these reflections on community take us beyond the traditional model of the social bond. The point here—if such can be said—is that there is a necessity, a demand, to which Nancy and Blanchot both respond: that of leaving the question open. In so doing, in interrogating “community” as that which undoes identity and commonality as such, Nancy and Blanchot open both the chance and the risk of politics that is otherwise (fascistically) foreclosed. This effort, this fragile gesture (fragile because it is such a precarious undertaking to try to say that which hides within language as its unrepresentable secret; to try to say the gesture of speaking itself, that which opens the possibility of communication, and which is itself therefore utterly and in principle incommunicable), this fragile effort to leave the question of the community open by interrogating it in its very possibility, is where political significance rests. This is, as Derrida had originally put it, “very little, almost nothing” (1978, p. 80; cf. Nancy 1991, p. 68). And yet: “The table” as Derrida says elsewhere “—the table of contents or the table of the community—has to mark an empty place for someone absolutely indeterminate”, precisely so that “some indetermination [is] left, signifying hospitality for what is to come”. He continues,

If something is given to be read that is totally intelligible, that can be totally saturated by sense, it is not given to the other to be read. Giving to the other to be read is also a *leaving to be desired*, or a leaving the other room for an intervention by which she will be able to write her own interpretation: the other will have to be able to sign in my text (Derrida & Ferraris 2001, p. 31).

Blanchot and Nancy, I have argued, each respond in a singular way to this demand.

I have also tried to show, however, that there is a particular political purchase to Nancy’s undertaking with respect to the question of solidarity, notwithstanding the fact that it is not and will not be a program for progressive political change. Specifically, a certain solidarity emerges not from how he ultimately re-visions what community might yet be, not from his *politics*, but rather from his attempts to question in an ethico-ontological register the philosophical suppositions of community, of *the political (le politique)*, beyond or before sovereignty, beyond or before the understanding of the social bond as “a relationship among previously constituted subjects” (Fraser 1984, p. 141). Insofar as Nancy asks the question of the ethnicity of being itself, he suspends “the” community in its work and thus opens “us” (as) (arche-) community to “our” possible futures.

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