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COMMUNITY, IMMUNITY, BIOPOLITICS

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Community, immunity, and biopolitics: what is the relation between these three terms through which my recent work has wound its way? Can they be connected together in a relationship that is more than just a simple series of concepts or lexicons? Not only is this possible, in my view, it is also necessary. Indeed, each of these terms takes on its fullest sense only in relation to the other two. But let us start from a historical given, by briefly recalling the transition that the two semantic categories – first community and then biopolitics – went through in contemporary philosophical debate. In the late 1980s in France and Italy, a discourse on the concept of community took form that was radically deconstructive toward the way the concept-term had been used in twentieth-century philosophy as a whole – first by the German organicist sociology on *Gemeinschaft* (community), then by the various ethics of communication, and finally, by American neocommunitarianism. Despite significant differences, what linked these three conceptions was a tendency – which could be defined as meta-physical – to conceive of community in a substantialist, subjective sense. Community was understood as a substance that connected certain individuals to each other through the sharing of a common identity. Based on this understanding, community seemed to be conceptually linked to the figure of the “proper”: whether it was a matter of appropriating what is in common or communicating what is proper, the community was still defined by a mutual belonging. What its members had in common was what was proper to them – that of being proprietors of their commonality.

It was in opposition to this conceptual short-circuit – on the basis of which the common was

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reversed into its logical opposite, namely, the proper – that a number of books appeared in rapid succession, including Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community*, Maurice Blanchot’s *The Unavowable Community*, Giorgio Agamben’s *The Coming Community*, and my own *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*. What brought these works into the same arena was a sort of modification of the previous semantic category; in the sense that, quite literally, instead of community referring to a property or a belonging of its members, it alluded rather to a constitutive alterity that also differentiated community from itself, evacuating it of any identity-making connotations. Instead of being united by a substance or *res* (thing), the individuals of a community as it

was defined in these works were connected by a fault line that ran through the individuals and reciprocally contaminated them. Especially in the book by Nancy, who had opened up this perspective along a trajectory strongly marked by Heidegger's *Mitsein* and Bataille's *être avec*, community was not conceived of as that which puts certain individuals into relationship, but rather as the very being of the relationship. To say, as Nancy claimed, that community is not a common "being," but, rather, the being "in common" of an existence that coincides with exposure to otherness, means to do away with all substantialist interpretations, whether particular and universal or subjective and objective in character. However, despite the theoretical fruitfulness of this step, a problem still remained to be solved. By removing community from the horizon of subjectivity, Nancy made its political ramifications extremely difficult to articulate – starting from the obvious difficulty of imagining a politics that stands entirely outside subjectivity – thus retaining it in a necessarily impolitical dimension. For this reason the discourse on community continued to fluctuate between a political approach that ended up being regressive – the one on small homelands of soil and blood – and a theoretically fruitful approach that was inexpressible in political terms. My impression is that at the bottom of this difficulty in expressing the new concept of community in political terms there lay a tendency on the part of its theoreticians, and of Nancy in particular, to look at it from the point of view of the *cum* rather than from that of the *munus*. It was as if the absolute privilege given to the figure of relation, of relationship, ended up eliminating its most important content – the very object of mutual exchange – and then, along with it, its potentially political significance as well.

The personal contribution that I tried to make to the discussion was a genealogical shift toward the origin of the concept. I mean that the idea of community bears within itself the key for escaping its impolitical turn and for regaining a political significance; but only by traveling back through history all the way to its Latin root of *communitas*, and even before

that to the term from which this derives, namely, that of *munus*. Starting from this assumption, I set out on an interpretative path that, while motivated by the same need as the French deconstructionists, departed significantly from theirs at least with regard to one point in particular. While assuming the *pars destruens* of their discourse against identity-making communitarisms, and staying within the concept of community, I shifted attention from the sphere of the *cum*, which was the focus of Nancy's analysis, to that of the *munus*, which he had somehow left in the shadows. Its complex, bivalent meaning of "law" and "gift" – and, more specifically, of the law of a unilateral gift to others – allowed me to maintain and even emphasize the expropriative semantic category that had been developed by the deconstructionists: to belong entirely to the originary *communitas* means to give up one's most precious substance, namely, one's individual identity, in a process of gradual opening from self to the other. But at the same time, I allowed myself to take a step forward, or rather sideways, which opened up a possible avenue toward the political sphere.

Central to this passage is the paradigm of immunity, which is difficult to access from the side of the *cum* because it derives its negative or privative meaning specifically from the term *munus*. If *communitas* is what binds its members in a commitment of giving from one to the other, *immunitas*, by contrast, is what unburdens from this burden, what exonerates from this responsibility. In the same way that community refers to something general and open, immunity – or immunization – refers to the privileged particularity of a situation that is defined by being an exception to a common condition. This is evident in legal terms, according to which someone who has immunity – whether parliamentary or diplomatic – is not subject to a jurisdiction that applies to all other citizens in derogation of the common law. But it is equally recognizable in the medical and biological meanings of the term, according to which natural or induced immunization implies the ability of the body, by means of its own antibodies, to resist an infection

caused by an external virus. By overlaying the legal and medical semantic fields, one may well conclude that if community breaks down the barriers of individual identity, immunity is the way to rebuild them, in defensive and offensive forms, against any external element that threatens it. This applies to individuals, but also to particular communities, which also tend to be immunized against any foreign element that appears to threaten them from outside. Hence the double bind implicit in immunitary dynamics – typical of modernity and increasingly widespread today in all spheres of individual and collective experience, both real and imaginary. Although immunity is necessary to the preservation of our life, when driven beyond a certain threshold it forces life into a sort of cage where not only our freedom gets lost but also the very meaning of our existence – that opening of existence outside itself that takes the name of *communitas*. This is the contradiction that I have sought to bring to attention in my work: that which protects the body (the individual body, the social body, and the body politic) is at the same time that which impedes its development. It is also that which, beyond a certain threshold, is likely to destroy it. To use the words of Walter Benjamin, one could say that immunization at high doses is the sacrifice of the living – of every qualified life, that is – for the sake of mere survival. It is the reduction of life to its bare biological matter. How the category of community can regain a new political significance, without ending up in a substantialist metaphysics, becomes clear thanks to this hermeneutic key. The moment the immunitary dispositif becomes the syndrome of our time, one that is both defensive and offensive, community presents itself as the chosen locus – the real and symbolic form – of resistance to the excess of immunization that relentlessly entraps us. If immunity tends to shut our existence up into non-communicating circles or enclosures, community is not so much a larger circle that contains them as it is a passage that cuts through their boundary lines and mixes up the human experience, freeing it from its obsession with security.

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But here is where the second question that we began with gets grafted onto the first: the type of politics that we are speaking about in this case can only be a form of biopolitics. Since the phenomenon of immunity is inscribed precisely at the point of intersection between law and biology, between medical procedure and legal protection, it is clear that the politics that it gives rise to, in the form of action or reaction, must be in direct relationship with biological life. But the relationship between biopolitics on the one hand and the oppositional dialectic between community and immunity on the other is even more intrinsic – because it touches on the otherwise elusive meaning of the various kinds of dynamics bundled together that can all be traced to the biopolitical paradigm. It would be pointless to reconstruct the recent history of this paradigm here, one that originated from courses that Michel Foucault gave in the 1970s and that was pursued mainly by Italian interpreters – initially by Giorgio Agamben and Antonio Negri – who developed the extraordinary insights of the French thinker along original lines.

These authors' different approaches to the category of biopolitics, however, are precisely what point to a difficulty, or better yet, to a fundamental antinomy – one that is somehow recognizable in a latent form in Foucault's works – that consists essentially in a missing, or inadequate, joint between the two poles of *bios* and politics out of which the term "biopolitics" is composed. Rather than being joined into a single semantic block, it's as if they were designed separately and then only later related to each other. What I mean is that the radical difference between a negative, if not apocalyptic, type of interpretation and an opposite, markedly optimistic and even euphoric interpretation of biopolitics is embedded in a semantic breach, already to be found in the writings of Foucault, between two layers of meaning in the concept that were never perfectly integrated and, indeed, that were destined to break it into two parts that are mutually

incompatible or only compatible through the violent subjugation of one to the dominion of the other. Thus, either life appears to be seized, and seemingly imprisoned, by a power destined to reduce it to mere organic matter, or politics risks remaining dissolved in the rhythm of a life that is able to reproduce itself without interruption beyond the historical contradictions that assail it. In the first case, the tendency of the biopolitical regime is to not deviate from the sovereign regime, of which it appears to be an internal fold; in the second case, it emancipates itself from the sovereign regime almost to the point of losing all contact with its deep genealogy. As we noted earlier, Foucault himself never came to a decisive choice between these two extreme possibilities, and he continued to vacillate from one to the other without ever arriving at a definitive solution. In his categorial apparatus, the relationship between the sovereign and biopolitical regimes as well as that between modernity and totalitarianism remained clouded by this fundamental indecisiveness regarding the meaning of what he himself called “biopolitics” or “biopower” – without attributing any particular significance to this lexical difference – and even more regarding its outcomes. As I have already observed, my impression is that there is something missing from his formidable conceptual dispositif – a link or a joining segment between the two – that is able to connect these different configurations of the concept and, even prior to that, to connect the two polarities of life and politics into a more organic, complex form than the one he created, still hesitantly, in his pioneering work.

This constitutive nexus is what I have sought to identify in the paradigm of immunization. In its dual appearance in the legal and biological realms, this paradigm is the exact point of tangency between the spheres of life and politics. This is where the possibility arises of filling the gap in principle between the two extreme interpretations of biopolitics – between its deadly version and its euphoric version. Instead of two opposing, irreconcilable ways of understanding the category, they constitute two internal possibilities, in a horizon that is

unified precisely by the bivalent character of the immune dispositif, which is both positive and negative, protective and destructive. Once the dual character of the immunization process has been established – as both the protection and negation of life – the paradigm of biopolitics or biopower can also be defined more congruously by taking immunization as a starting point. The negative mode that has characterized the biopolitical paradigm is not a result of the violent subjugation that power exerts on life from the outside, but rather the contradictory way that life itself tries to defend itself from the dangers that threaten it, contradicting its other equally prominent needs. Immunity, necessary to the preservation of individual and collective life – none of us would stay alive without the immune system in our bodies – if assumed in a form that is exclusive and exclusionary toward all other human and environmental alterities, ends up counteracting its own development.

At stake, if you like, is the difference – which Derrida brought to the fore in another fashion – between immunization and self-immunization. We all know what autoimmune diseases are. They are pathological conditions that occur when our body’s immune system becomes so strong that it turns against itself, causing the death of the body. This does not happen all the time, of course. Normally the immune system is limited to a role of preservation, without turning against the body that houses it. But when this does happen, it is not provoked by an external cause but rather by the immune mechanism itself, which is intensified to an intolerable degree. A similar dynamic is also recognizable in the body politic, when the protective barriers against the outside begin to represent a greater risk than what they are intended to prevent. As we know, one of our society’s greatest risks today lies in an excessive demand for protection, which in some cases tends to produce an impression of danger, whether real or imagined, for the sole purpose of setting up increasingly powerful preventive defense weapons against it. This logical and historical articulation between the paradigms of biopower and immunization allows us, on the

one hand, to clarify the meaning of the concept of biopolitics and, on the other, to establish an internal distinction between its negative mode and another potentially affirmative mode. The fact that the first mode was far more prevalent throughout the course of the last century than the second does not mean that the affirmative mode cannot make a reappearance.

But first things first. It has often been questioned whether the category of biopolitics has any true specificity, since politics has always, in one way or another, been involved with life, even in its strictly biological sense. Weren't agrarian policy in ancient Rome and the use of slave bodies in ancient empires forms of biopolitics? So what distinguishes them, in essence, from what has been called biopolitics? Furthermore, did biopolitics come into being with modernity, as Foucault was inclined to believe, or does it have a longer, deeper genealogy? It could be said in answer to these questions that, looked at from the point of view of its living matter, all politics has taken and will take a biopolitical form. But what caused the first modern intensification and, later on, during the totalitarian phase, its thanatopolitical development, was its immunitary character. As Nietzsche saw clearly, what we call "modernity" is nothing but a metalanguage that has allowed us to respond in immunitary terms to a series of preventive security demands that arose from the very depths of life at a time when the promises of transcendental salvation had vanished. If the paradigm of immunization helps us to understand the structural link between modernity and biopolitics, that of autoimmunization allows us to establish the relationship as well as the element of discontinuity between modern biopolitics and the thanatopolitics of the Nazi regime. In the latter instance, not only had the racial defense of the Germanic people become the main focus of German politics – in a form that made their survival conditional on the death of their external and internal enemies – but, at a certain point, when defeat seemed inevitable, the order was even given for self-destruction. In this case, the immune syndrome took on all the

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lineaments of an autoimmune disorder, and biopolitics came to coincide perfectly with thanatopolitics.

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As has now become clear, the end of Nazism – and then, nearly half a century later, of Soviet communism – did not mark the end of biopolitics, which has settled permanently in contemporary society in a form that may appear to have replaced the old ideologies. It is not difficult to recognize its growing presence in all areas of domestic and international politics, along a line of growing indistinction between public and private. From the health sector to that of biotechnology, from ethnic issues to the environment, the only source of political legitimacy today seems to be the preservation and implementation of life. It is precisely in this context that the need for an affirmative biopolitics returns with new urgency. This would be something – a horizon of meaning – in which life would no longer be the object but somehow the subject of politics. So what sort of shape would it take? Where would we trace its symptoms? With what objectives? This question, or set of questions, is far from easy to answer. Having experienced negative biopolitics, or even overt thanatopolitics, is not enough in itself to identify its opposite by contrast. You cannot just reverse certain practices with deadly aims into positive ones. What is required is a leap in quality in order to set up the connection between constraints and needs in a totally different way, including the expansion of financial markets and the protection of those who are weakest in social, cultural, and generational terms. In this across-the-board effort, only made possible by a new alliance between national and international politics, between individuals and collectives – including parties and movements – a first point of orientation, one that is not solely theoretical, can be found specifically in the dialectic between community and immunity that we referred to earlier. The task at hand is to overturn in

some way – indeed in every way – the balance of power between “common” and “immune”; to separate the immunitary protection of life from its destruction by means of the common; to conceptualize the function of immune systems in a different way, making them into relational filters between inside and outside instead of exclusionary barriers. How? Starting from what assumptions? Using what tools? The problem has to be tackled on two levels: by disabling the apparatuses of negative immunization, and by enabling new spaces of the common.

Let’s start from the first point. We have already seen how the abnormal growth in devices of control and subjugation leads to a corresponding decrease in individual and collective freedoms. Dividing barriers, blocks to the circulation of ideas, languages, and information, surveillance mechanisms set up in all the sensitive places: these are increasingly extensive forms of devitalization that, on the one hand, we must remove ourselves from, and, on the other, that we must resist by all legitimate means. This is particularly difficult to do. First, because the contemporary dispositifs – from biometrics taken at border crossings to photoelectric cells that capture us in our every move, to wiretapping that records our words or messages – are also ordered to protect society and ourselves. But there’s another, more fundamental reason for the difficulty; namely, because as Foucault has made perfectly clear, the subjectification that gives meaning to our practices always takes place through some form of subjugation – so to escape subjugation always involves a desubjectivizing effect. This is why fleeing the dispositifs, or disabling them, always involves a double outcome – of liberation and isolation, of emancipation and impoverishment. Of course, to live outside the network of the Internet is possible – but at no small cost of alienation and disorientation with respect to the globalized world. What one needs to do, before causing them to shut down, or simply not allowing oneself to be captured by them, is to preventively distinguish between dispositifs of prohibition, dispositifs of control, and dispositifs of subjugation;

between systems that facilitate our individual and collective experience, and apparatuses that diminish its vital power. Or even to preserve areas of silence in the midst of communications that are now extended to every moment of our lives.

But this is not enough. This is only the negative aspect – that of individual withdrawal – of a strategy that also has to be played out through positive moves. The untying of the immune bonds must be accompanied by the production of common spaces, spheres, and dimensions, which are increasingly threatened by the interference of their opposite. If you think about the term and the concept of “common,” it has three opposites – the concepts of “proper,” “private,” and “immune” – which differ but converge in their contrastive effect. All three, in different ways, are opposed to the semantics of the common in the differing but converging forms of appropriation, privatization, and immunization. These are the three modes by which social ties are dissolved, but even before them, by which the idea of the “common good” is dissolved as well, continually decreasing in intensity and expanse in a world that nevertheless likes to think of itself as global. For some time now, not only philosophers but also legal theorists have started on the task of reconstituting the semantics of the concept of the common good, which is squeezed between the opposing, specular concepts of the private good and the public good. The legal system that arose in ancient Rome as private law was intended to sanction in a legally codified form the originary appropriation of things; but also the appropriation of certain human beings who were reduced to the status of thing by those who proclaimed themselves to be their owners by force. In the modern world, this dynamic of appropriation has been joined by the making public of goods assigned to the control and enjoyment of state bodies. In this way, the space of the common, which cannot be appropriated by individuals or by the state, has become increasingly thinner until it coincides with the legally undecidable area of the *res nullius*, or “nobody’s property.” When the general immune mechanism was set in motion, this withdrawal of the common –

under the converging pressure of the proper, the private and the public – became even more sweeping. Immunity has not merely reinforced the boundaries of the proper, it has gradually assailed the sphere of the public as well. It is no coincidence that sovereignty has revealed itself to be the first, fundamental immunitary dispositif, along with the categories of property and freedom, which were also preventively immunized.

In the twilight of early modernity, when these categories came into direct contact with the horizon of biological life, the erosion of the common good – which was everybody's and nobody's, nobody's because it was everybody's – it became even more intense. Environmental resources were the first to be privatized – water, earth, air, mountains, rivers; then the city spaces, public buildings, roads, and cultural assets; and finally intellectual resources, the communication spaces, and information tools. All of this while waiting for organs of biological life to be legally available for sale and purchased by the highest bidder. Modernity – with the invention of the state, the largest political dispositif – had already intended to exclude the common good, everybody's good; or at least it reduced it more and more in favor of a dialectic between private and public designed to progressively occupy the entire social scene. In reading authors like John Locke, or even Hugo Grotius, one sees how they went about theorizing the necessity to break down a world given by God to everybody – in other words, to no one in particular – into what belongs to individual owners and what belongs to the state. For a long period of time, yet to end, the concept of government property, as public property of the state, was not the opposite of private property but a complementary aspect of it. With what we usually define as globalization, this kind of “making public” [*publicizzazione*] of the private is increasingly intertwined with the inverse phenomenon of the privatization of the public in a manner that seems to exhaust, and even exclude something like a common good from the horizon of possibilities. This becomes even more important when, with the biopolitical

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turn underway, any property – whether material or intellectual, corporeal or technological – directly or indirectly comes to involve the sphere of biological life, including in the latter all the resources of the intellect and language, the symbolic and the imaginary, needs and desires.

Now it is precisely on this terrain that the battle for an affirmative biopolitics must be braved and possibly won. It must start precisely by breaking the vise grip between public and private that threatens to crush the common, by seeking instead to expand the space of the common. The fight that has begun against the planned privatization of water, the battle over energy sources, or the one seeking to re-examine the patents granted by pharmaceutical companies that prevent the distribution of cheaper medicines in the poorer areas of the planet all go in this direction. This is, of course, a difficult battle – also because we must not make the strategic mistake of abandoning the public space in favor of the common space, and by doing so possibly facilitate the privatization process. But we must not confuse the common good with that pertaining to the sovereignty of the state or government departments and agencies, which are in any case regulated by the prior juridical division between public and private. The problem is that there are currently no legal statutes and codes aimed at protecting the common in relation to the private, the proper, and the immune. In fact, coming prior to adequate legislation, we currently lack even a vocabulary to talk about something – the common – that was effectively excluded first from the process of modernization and then from the process of globalization. The common is neither the public – which is dialectically opposed to the private – nor the global, to which the local corresponds. It is something largely unknown, and even refractory, to our conceptual categories, which have long been organized by the general immune dispositif. Yet the challenge for an affirmative biopolitics, *of* life and no longer *on* life, is staked precisely on this possibility: on our capacity, even before

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acting, to think within this horizon, to think around and even from within the common. This is the direction that has been guiding my work over recent years – including through the category of the “impersonal.”



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