

**COMMUNITY AT
LOOSE ENDS**

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COMMUNITY

On the Limit

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Nothing can authorize anyone—me, for example—more than anyone else to respond to the text by Jean-Luc Nancy, “Of Being-in-Common.”* Indeed, not having been trained as a philosopher, I should be less authorized to respond in this place where perhaps ultimate demands are being made on the possibilities of philosophical discourse. Yet, if the ultimate demand of thought is to think together not what or who we are, but only *that* we are in common without commonality, then indeed, as Nancy writes, the task “can no longer be simply philosophical.” I will proceed, then, in the hope that my not-yet-philosophical thinking may somewhere cross this no-longer-simply-philosophical thinking whose necessity Nancy discerns and whose possibility is opened up by his writing.

For a few years now, I have been following Nancy’s development of this thinking of being-in-common—with *Le Partage des voix* (1982), *L’Impératif catégorique* (1983), *La Communauté désœuvrée* (1986), and most recently, most powerfully perhaps, *L’Expérience de la liberté* (1988). It was thus with a certain number of *renvois* to these other works that I could come to read the essay “Of Being-in-Common.” I would like to get into my response via one such *renvoi*, which comes from *La Communauté désœuvrée*:

Because there is this unfinished [*désœuvrement*] that partitions our being in common, there is “literature,” that indefinitely repeated and

*This essay was read at a discussion of Nancy’s text with the Critical Studies and the Human Sciences Research group of UCLA in November 1988.

suspended gesture of touching the limit, indicating and inscribing it but without crossing it or abolishing it in the fiction of a common body. To write for others means in reality to write because of others. The writer gives nothing and destines nothing to others; the project s/he has in view is not to communicate anything whatsoever, neither a message nor her/himself. To be sure, there are always messages and persons, and it is important that both (treating them, if I can, as identical for the moment) be communicated. But writing is the gesture which obeys the sole necessity of exposing the limit—not the limit of communication, *but the limit on which communication takes place.* (167; my translation)

This passage finds echoes with those moments of the essay that I found most compelling—that is, most demanding of response. **These are the moments when the text we are reading partially folds back over itself and bids us to suspend our expectant watch for a message that will close off the communicative relay, that will signal that the communication is at an end and has reached its end, its destination.**

Nancy writes: “The writer gives nothing and destines nothing to others; the project s/he has in view is not to communicate anything whatsoever, neither a message nor her/himself.” The echo with “Of Being-in-Common” might be heard in a passage like the one beginning on page 19, for example, where Nancy asks: “Can this exposition be exposed? Can it be presented or represented? . . . Can we present the sense of the *in*-common through which only sense in general is possible?” To these questions about the possibility of presenting or representing exposition (and this may be as good a place as any to recall that all these words—presentation, representation, exposition, communication—are so many names we also give to what is going on here and now, in the space of writing/reading/hearing/speaking in common), Nancy first responds with the two versions of a certain failing or falling of exposition that present themselves: **“we assign and show the being (or the essence) of the *in*-common, and . . . as a consequence we present community to itself,”** in which case “sense thus (re-)presented immediately undoes the whole exposition and with it, the sense of sense itself”; **or else, we do not present or represent it, “which means in fact that we represent that there is nothing to present of the *in*-common except the repetition of a ‘human condition’ that does not even attain a ‘co-humanity,’”** in which case once again “the sense of the sense crumbles.”

You will have already heard the folding over or folding back of this questioning on itself. That is, the question: “Can this exposition be exposed?” asks to be heard in at least two registers or two modes at once: On the one hand, can the exposition I am talking about or thematizing—that of being-exposed-to-itself-itself-and-thus-to-others—**find an adequate representation, a name, an exposure (as one says of a photographic exposure, a snapshot, in French a *cliché*)?** On the

other hand, but also at the same time, can *this* exposition—by which I am attempting but necessarily failing to name being-in-common—be exposed at the limit of its failing to name, of its falling back into clichés (a “co-humanity” that Nancy notes parenthetically is “a flat condition . . . neither human nor inhuman”), and thus in effect already *displace* or *ex-pose* its own terms by those of others for whom, which is to say *because* of whom, I write?

These two modes or two registers—which I have just separated but which are in fact always articulated with each other—can be heard insisting together and equally whenever Nancy writes “*on* the limit,” “*sur* la limite,” which, I maintain, is what he is always doing even if the *phrase itself occurs* only once or twice in “Of Being-in-Common” (it occurs more frequently in *La Communauté désœuvrée*). We commonly use the expression “to write on something,” by which we understand: on a thesis, a theme, an object for discourse—here, for example, “being-in-common.” But this is not just any theme or thesis; it is the very possibility of any sense at all taking place and taking place in the only place it can: on the limit. Thus, the prepositional phrase “on the limit” is topical not only because it announces a topic, but because it situates this writing on the limit on the limit. As Nancy says in the passage I have already read: “Writing is the gesture which obeys the sole necessity of exposing the limit—not the limit of communication, *but the limit on which communication takes place.*”

But we cannot assimilate this writing on the limit too quickly to our ordinary understanding of writing on *something*. “The limit,” writes Nancy, “is nothing: it is nothing but this extreme *abandonment* in which all *property*, all singular instance of property, in order to be what it is, is first of all given over to the outside” (p. 8). In a sense, I will have done nothing here but repeat, reflect, recite that nothing—if that makes any sense. *It is nothing, it is not a place, most of all it is not a dividing line between some inside and outside, yet it limits, and by limiting it also allows communication to happen, to take place. It is the limitation without which there is no possibility of sense, the restriction or constriction that at the same time opens up the possibility of sense, of proper meaning, proper place—of “le propre.”*

Nancy retains this designation—*le propre*—in the face of what would seem to be overwhelming reasons to abandon it; that is, he retains it to designate that which is first of all abandoned or “given over to the outside.” For example, in another passage we read:

To be exposed is to be on the limit where, at the same time, there is both inside and outside, and neither inside nor outside. . . . It is to be “in oneself” according to a partition [*partage*] of “self,” . . . it is constitutive of “self,” a generalized *ectopia* of all “proper” places (such as intimacy, identity, individuality, name), places that are what they are only by virtue of being exposed on their limits, by their limits, and as these very limits. *That does not mean that there is nothing*

“proper” to these places, but that the proper would be brought about essentially by a “cleaving” or by a “schism.” [Italics added.] Which means that the proper is without essence, and yet, is exposed. (7)

One of the most productively disconcerting gestures sketched out here is this refusal to abandon “le propre” even as the necessity of its self-abandonment is being exposed. I would like to understand this gesture as a translation of the task that Nancy ascribes earlier (3) to “an ontology of community,” the task, therefore, that he has in some measure assumed. He writes: “The sole task for an ontology of community is, *through* thinking about being and its *différance*, to radicalize or aggravate Hegelian thinking about the Self until it caves in.” The key to this aggravation (in the strong sense of the word) would have to be the displacement (the “generalized ectopia”) of appropriation by and through exposition. The gesture of philosophy—of thought, of writing—or its task must henceforth be toward “an unheard-of exteriority beyond appropriation.” Beyond appropriation, but not beyond the exposition of “le propre” to the outside that it can neither appropriate nor exclude, that is thus not in any simple sense an outside. An ontology of community—of that which ontology has seemed to have been altogether unaware up to now (1)—would entail a general displacement or replacement of the verb “to be” (which has meant—“up to now”—to be appropriated) with its unappropriable other sense: to be exposed. (Here, I was reminded of just such a radical aggravation of Hegelian thinking, Jacques Derrida’s *Glas*, in which he proposes at one point to replace the verb *être* by the verb *bander*.) “Le propre” is exposed, and we cannot write, utter, or otherwise repeat that syntagma (which in one sense is all I am doing here) without wrenching “le propre” out of reach of all appropriation. Its concept caves in, indeed its collapse has already occurred before we can utter its name, but also so that we can utter its name: the proper name and the name of the proper is always *in memoriam*.

But I suspended the movement that follows from the question I cited earlier, “Can this exposition be exposed?” It does not receive only negative answers that describe an alternative between two modes of failing or falling before the task of exposition. Nancy continues:

Whatever we do, however, or whatever we don’t do, nothing takes place, nothing truly takes place but this exposition. Its necessity is the very opening of what, because we cannot linger over these words here, I will call liberty, equality, justice, fraternity. [Elsewhere, in *L’Expérience de la liberté*, it is precisely over these words that Nancy lingers, so to speak.] Even so, if nothing takes place but this exposure—that is to say, if being *in* common resists communion and disaggregation invincibly—this exposition and this resistance are neither immediate nor immanent. They are not a given that could be affirmed

by merely picking it up. It is certain that being-in-common insists and resists, *otherwise I would not even have written this and you would never have read it.* [Italics added.] But that does not entail the conclusion that all we have to do is to say it to expose it. The necessity of being-in-common is not that of a physical law, and whoever wants to expose it must also expose himself (that is what we can call “thought,” “writing,” and their partition and sharing [*partage*]). (9)

(Here I might ask parenthetically: What can possibly justify these long quotations from a text we have read in common? Why impose the repetition of this reading aloud from what we have each read in silence? What can this addition of a voice, and another language—for we must not forget that “Of Being-in-Common” exposes itself here to translation into another tongue—possibly add to what has already offered itself to our common understanding? I leave these questions suspended on the limit.) The exposition, neither immediate nor immanent, not appropriable therefore as a concept, takes place and is all that takes place: but that apparently limiting proposition (“nothing truly takes place but this exposition”) is deceptive if we hear it only in the mode of a limitation. The phrase “the exposition takes place” translates as the taking place of the place. A place is thus also given (“the writer gives nothing . . .”), rather than taken away or reserved inaccessibly behind some barrier-limit. It is the place given to thought, to writing, to communication, and the place they give themselves through their *partage*. When Nancy writes: “It is certain that being-in-common insists and resists, otherwise I would not even have written this and you would never have read it,” we are given to think that which insists and resists, that which impels, compels, or repels thinking, which has its place also here, between writing and reading, or rather within them both—one within the other according to an unrepresentable topology of the *in*-common. “Whoever wants to expose it must also expose himself”: A self exposed: once again “le propre” is in play, takes place, can only take place with “it,” in it, as being-in-common. With this co-exposition of “himself,” Nancy has in mind a task for philosophy or for an ontology of community (he says “whoever wants to expose it *must* expose himself” and this necessity for thought can only be assumed as its task—a word he has elsewhere distinguished from *oeuvre*). This is specified a little further on:

Henceforth, then, there may well be a task that is indissociably and perhaps even indiscernibly “philosophical” and “communitary” (a task for thought and politics, if these words fit without further examination), and that task would be to expose the unexposable *in*. To *expose* it, which is to say, in presenting or representing it, to make the (re)presentation itself, in turn, the site and the focus of an exposition; so that thought itself might risk itself and abandon itself to “community,” and “community” to “thought.” (10)

The question I want to ask would be the following: Does this task of co-exposition, or self-exposition, comprise or define the task mentioned in the final paragraph: the task of displacing “the idea of ‘critique’”? It is mentioned in a passage that evokes both the “risks that are linked to a critique of democracy,” and, on the other hand, “the risk of what we still call ‘democracy.’” The displacement of the idea of “critique” is situated between these opposed, but not symmetrical or commensurable, risks. It seems to me that the displacement in question must concern not just the idea of critique, but the idea of democracy, of what we always or still call democracy. Unless “critique” and “democracy” are or can be displaced names for each other? To negotiate between the parallel but asymmetrical risks requires, does it not, something like a self-exposition or self-critique of democracy—that is, an exposition of democracy at the limits of its concept, perhaps the exposition of the limits of the democratic concept as it has always been thought too uncritically. But to what is democracy exposed in thus exposing itself? To what other-than-democracy (what we have always called democracy) is it abandoned at its limit? In other words, is democracy only the name of the lesser evil, “the spectacle of general appropriation,” or is it still that in the name of which we promise ourselves “not to let go of sense *in common*”?

Questions abandoned here, on the limit.