COMMUNITY

COMMUNITY AT LOOSE ENDS

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Introduction

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What is the peculiar evocative force of the notion of community? What is its apparently irresistible attraction and ability to mobilize the energies of the most diverse groups, all of which are first and foremost constituted by their very interpellation *as* communities? Is there not an element of demagoguery or mystification at work in the seductive appeal to community that merits our critical scrutiny before we so quickly subscribe to its ideological prestige? Might there not be a way to analyze that element, to isolate and if possible to dislodge it, in order for us *critically* to evaluate the workings of different communities, and beyond that, to develop a more just logic of community?

Taking their cue from the all but universal use of the term community as an unquestioned value, the following essays seek to rethink what it is that *we* mean by community when both the New Left and the New Right claim for themselves the enthusiastic appeal the notion still garners. But if we mean to rethink what is meant by ''community,'' this is neither to efface its putative last vestiges nor uncritically to endorse the blind utopianism it so often evokes. Instead, the urgency of contemporary appeals for a new *sense* of community, a new *sensus communis*, would seem to require a new concept of what it means to be together—that is, of the communal. And surprisingly, the West, as we shall see, is marked by a demonstrable paucity of ways to think community, although this paucity is perhaps less surprising when one considers the Western tradition's tendency to derive its disciplines and concepts from the presupposition of a self-generating subject. Before as well as after Descartes—that supreme thinker of autonomous selfhood—philosophy, theology, psychology, linguistics, and all the other *logoi* have at-

tempted to explain the world by extrapolating its existence outward from the inner workings of a subject. The necessary originarity and self-engenderment of this subject suppose its radical independence from all objecthood, thereby embroiling it in a fundamental solipsism that ipso facto posits an insuperable obstacle to the "alterity" such thinking still wishes, or at least needs, to explain. The bankruptcy of this Western notion of an originary subjectivity is nowhere more poignantly to be viewed than in Edmund Husserl's famous fifth "Cartesian Meditation," where the "rigorous science" of the phenomenologist cannot seem to prove the existence of anything or anyone besides his own eidetic self. Of course, the deconstruction of the theory of the subject has been the special province and pride of twentieth-century poststructuralism, and there is no particular need once again to rehearse its paradigms in this context.

Still, the very "successes" of deconstruction in taking apart the mystificatory constructs of the transcendental subject have led to its being accused of nihilism or of a willful (and irresponsible) delight in "destroying" any or all concepts of a general nature, including those that are said to be of benefit to progressive causes. Thus, according to this view, the category of "the subject" would be spirited away at the very historical moment that women, for example, and other oppressed groups have begun to claim for themselves the status and privilege of being subjects. Without responding here to the validity or invalidity of this particular charge, we would like to note that a similar view of poststructuralism as uniquely and irredeemably disintegrative in its interpretive effects would seem to foreclose any ability on its part to formulate a meaningful discourse about community. The celebrated claim that deconstruction is unable to come to terms with the sociopolitical, a claim unfortunately reinforced by the extreme caution exercised by some deconstructionists, leads to the charge that what politics it does have is at best quietistic and at worst reactionary in its witting or unwitting collusion within institutionalized structures of power.

Given such a climate, the deconstruction of community would appear insensitive if not pernicious in an age marked by the widespread apprehension that the "old" forms of collectivity are disappearing or have already disappeared, that impersonality, anonymity, and solitude are the lot of a modern humanity crowded into ever-expanding urban conglomerates, that the very bonds of social interaction are sundered by the multifarious dislocations, disruptions, and disappropriations that characterize life in postindustrial societies. For many, the celebration of difference and the suspicion of absolutes that characterize poststructuralism and postmodernism seem a mere ideological correlative of the ceaseless upheavals and relentlessly splintering effects exerted on the material level under modern capitalism.

Yet it is within this ambiance of vertiginous transformation and individualization that the call for a return to community has reemerged as both a necessity and a banality of contemporary political rhetoric, no matter what the persuasion. It is

a necessity to the extent that at least a minimal claim of transpersonal relevance must be made if there is to be *any* politics at all (as opposed to some kind of universal solipsism), and it is a banality to the extent that the appeal to community is made regardless of party lines. To the left's investment in "community activism" as a strategic retreat designed to reconstruct and build anew a base of popular support in the wake of severe electoral defeats by the right in England and the United States, corresponds the Thatcherite and Reaganite discourse on the return of juridical and managerial responsibilities to the level of "local communities," a cynical euphemism for the dismantling of the welfare state at the hands of so-called private enterprise. Even the victory of moderate socialism in France was predicated upon the issues of *auto-gestion*, regionalist autonomy, and bureaucratic decentralization.

Some insight into the ecumenical appeal of community might be gained if we consider for a moment the difference between the two etymologies proposed by the *OED* for the word community, between the more philologically valid formation of the word from *com* + *munis* (that is, with the sense of being bound, obligated, or indebted together) and the more folk-etymological combination of *com* + *unus* (or what is together as one). But the stakes involved in choosing between a community that is mutual indebtedness and a community that is absorption into oneness are more than just philological. As if by coincidence, the rival etymologies point to the two classic ways the West has tried to theorize community, between the organicist notion of the "body politic" most colloquially linked with the name of Hobbes and the idea of social contract popularized by Locke and the Enlightenment *philosophes*.

Yet both of these theories are belied by the Western philosophical tradition's apparent inability to think beyond the subject as its organizing category. For the organicist, the social body must inevitably be ruled by a head (*chef* or *caput*) under whose leadership the members or membership are subsumed. The one who stands for the multitude is the familiar formula behind a host of authoritarianisms, from the absolutism of classical France through a plethora of modern forms of statism and totalitarianism. At its most nightmarish, the concomitant reduction of social differences is figured by the very emblem of fascism: so many rods fastened around an ax and from whose handle they become indistinguishable. As opposed to this essentialism that thinks the communal only at the risk of positing the state as subject, the notion of social contract assumes the *prior* constitution of self-determining subjects who "freely" aggregate to form a community. As idealistic as the capitalist ideology of the workplace *qua* locus of "free" exchange, with which it is contemporary and which brutally levels the difference between those who already own means of production and have goods to sell and those who have nothing to sell but their own labor power, the notion of social contract strategically forgets the differences between subjects that may obtain in such a way as to obviate, or at least complicate, the presumption of their absolute equality. In

other words, to rephrase Orwell, some enter into the contract as more "equal" than others. Furthermore, theories of social contract have a hard time explaining from where and how these freely engaged subjectivities are constituted. This is because, once again, the social is thought from the standpoint of the individual who *then* encounters "others." As such, both organicist and contractual theories of community conceal the essentialism of a subject immanent to itself, which speaks either for and as a whole that would precede the parts (*com-unus*) or as a part that is itself already a whole before its encounter with other "parts" (*communis*). In their respective inabilities to think the communal relation as such and as the inaugural condition for the very subjectivities that claim to speak for it, the alternatives of atomism and totalitarianism have each proceeded to an aggressive reduction and elimination of social difference, which in turn has fueled the contemporary sense of the loss of community. Whether it be through the fascistic denial of difference pursued via the mechanisms of exclusion, deportation, and "final solution," or the bankruptcy of a possessive individualism whose celebration of the private and the personal in fact reduces all subjectivities to identical consumers of identical goods (whose sole variation stems from the economic necessity of creating ever-new markets for an [n]ever-saturated public), both of these forms of social essentialism vitiate the very condition of the communal relation, namely the *difference* between singular subjectivities which is part of what *they* share by being in common, even as those essentialisms take place in the name of preserving some mythic "community" (be it the Aryan race or the "silent majority" of Middle Americans).

Nor are fascism and possessive individualism the only discourses that conceive community as an immanent *com-unus*. The Christian doctrine of *communion*, as concretized in the sacrament of the Eucharist, looks back to the communal breaking and sharing of Christ's body *qua* bread and forward to that redemptive moment of eschatological commingling when the elect shall be reconciled and made one with God. This absolute communion is both the end of history and the end of the community whose redemptive narrative it is. Similarly, the traditional Marxist narrative posits the classless, propertyless society that *communism* would be, at and as the end of the history it would both recount and concretely bring about. And the liberalist ideal of *consensus*, most forcefully argued today by the works of Jürgen Habermas, narrativizes the end of the dialogic interchange that signals disagreement as the advent of a communal monologue, wherein the previously dissenting interlocutors would now speak as one. These idealized communities of consensus, communism, and communion are all predicated upon the utopian overcoming of the historical or agonistic differences that keep them from being at one with themselves, that keep them from being themselves. All three are thus subtended by a myth of immanence that would explain their coming into being as but the unraveling or disclosing of what already is, the underlying *com-unus* whose full revelation awaits the Second Coming, the Rev-

olution, or the compromise of consensus. The providentialism of such a discourse clearly belies the claim to historicism since, theoretically speaking and as Hegel understood so well in the preface to the *Phenomenology*, history is already necessarily over if its end has been determined and if what remains before the end is but the inessential epiphenomenon of a time that can henceforth only be marked as dead.

Assuming, then, that no sociopolitical thinking can do without some theory of community, the urgency of rethinking that category requires the elaboration of a discourse that does not fall into the trap of an immanentism, whose pernicious effects have marked the political history of the twentieth century and whose preclusion of the value of difference makes it untenable before the contemporary exigency of articulating the demands of a host of new social movements (feminism, gay rights, ecological activism, and the struggles in support of the civil rights of blacks, Chicanos, Native Americans, and other oppressed groups— none of which movements are simply subsumable or even foreseeable under the traditional aegis of class struggle). It was in response to this theoretical climate that the Irvin Colloquium Committee of Miami University began in 1986 to organize a conference on various ''postmodern'' responses to the contemporary crisis of community. This conference, entitled ''Community at Loose Ends,'' was held in the fall of 1988 and was preceded by two years of reading groups and seminars with the invited participation of Jean-Luc Nancy, Jean-François Lyotard, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe, all of whom also later spoke at the colloquium. Their contributions have been gathered in this volume along with those of other conference participants (Verena Andermatt Conley, Christopher Fynsk, Peggy Kamuf, Linda Singer, Paul Smith, Richard Terdiman, and myself). In the remainder of this introduction, I will detail the responses of our contributors to the communitarian crisis evoked in the preceding pages and comment upon the field charted out by their collaborative efforts, a field certainly not lacking in contradictions, gaps, redundancies, exclusions, and antagonisms. Far from seeking some metadiscursive resolution between representatives of poststructuralism, postmodernism, post-Marxism, and feminism, our hope (and it can never be any more than just a hope) is to clear a space so that the *necessary* dissonances of this theoretical community might resonate beyond at least the accustomed walls of academic strife.

The question of the institutional limits of any theoretical attempt to redirect the complex and multivalent signifier that is community is most explicitly addressed by Linda Singer in her contribution to this volume. Overtly situating herself in a contemporary or ''postmodern'' context as well as within the local and particular context of our collective work on the question of community, she critically and resolutely measures the ineradicable risks, complicities, compromises, and possibilities involved in a revisionist understanding of community as being ''at loose

ends.'' Only when it is acknowledged, argues Singer, that ''community is not a referential sign but a call or appeal'' to a collective *praxis* wherein we are all implicated ''emotionally and psychically as well as intellectually,'' can radically revisionist and antiauthoritarian struggles overcome the elitisms that plague the ''community of critical thinkers'' as well as any number of social movements, including that ''privileged progressive political narrative'' that is traditional Marxism.

A major focal point that organizes the work included in this volume is provided by Jean-Luc Nancy's *La Communauté désoeuvrée*, whose publication in 1986 first served as an impetus to our thinking about the question of community, and whose arguments are either explicitly or implicitly responded to by nearly every essay in this volume. In fact, our title of *Community at Loose Ends* can also be read as a ''loose'' translation of his *La Communauté désoeuvrée*.[1] Given the prominence of Nancy's book in the elaboration of the theoretical work of our contributors, and indeed already in the preceding pages, some detailed consideration of his text is in order.

La Communauté désoeuvrée takes up the question of community in a modern world where everywhere community has dissolved or been destroyed. This obvious failure of communal models is shown to be linked to their embrace of the notion of human *immanence*, that is, of totality, self-consciousness, self-presence. Nancy argues that such ''failed'' notions of community — communism, liberalism, Christianity, etc. — are tributary to a metaphysics that has largely been unable to think without recourse to the subject. (Thus, the importance for Nancy of the Heideggerian *Dasein*.)

Community, as Nancy wants to revive the notion, is neither a community of subjects, nor a promise of immanence, nor a communion of individuals in some higher or greater totality (a State, a nation, a People, etc.). It is not, most specifically, the product of any work or project; it is *not* a work, not a product of projected labor, not an *oeuvre*, but what is un-worked, *dés-oeuvré*. It *is* what is given and what happens to ''singular beings,'' the exhibiting or presenting of their singularity, which is to say, the copresenting of their *finitude* as the very basis or condition for their commonality. At its limit, the communal relation would be defined by something we necessarily all share and yet cannot communicate: death, which is but Nancy's hyperbolic metaphor of the day-to-day finitude that marks the singularities of our being. A community of finitude does not repair the finitude it exposes or communicates; it does not promise the recuperation of an infinity somewhere beyond our finitude, of a redemptive life after death. Rather, finitude is said to *com-paraître* (literally, ''to appear together,'' but also ''to be cited to appear before judgment''). This *comparution* would thus be more originary than any intersubjective link or any other social bond since the latter presuppose the prior existence of entities that can *then* be brought together, whereas the former marks the very liminality of our being together and being no

more than together (of our being together *before* being even ourselves) in those incommunicable but necessarily shared moments of our finitude—of death, birth, and much else.

Pursuing his critique of immanent community on the level of discourse, Nancy locates a corollary in the language of myth, especially as it has been conceptualized from the Romantics through Lévi-Strauss, namely as the founding discourse of community. Myth, according to this view, is precisely what transmits itself from speaker to speaker as the myth of their communion, as the accession to itself—the performative enactment—of the very humanity that speaks it, as the immanence of a community of speakers ultimately founded upon the commonality of their speaking the myth of their own community. To the extent that myth accordingly communicates nothing but itself, it is not enough, says Nancy, to demythologize or demythify myth, not enough to say that "myth is a myth," since such reputed debunkings can do no more, in effect, than perpetuate myth in its very pragmatics of social foundationalism. Instead, argues Nancy, myth must be "interrupted," that is, disabled and displayed in its finitude as incomplete, exposed not as *oeuvre* but as *désoeuvré*. Such an interruption of myth is what Nancy calls "literature," by which he understands less some canon of aesthetically prized works of writing than all that which is communicated in the *comparution* of singular beings. Insofar as what is therein "communicated," however, is "not a message," but the *very* incommunicability of the finitude that is necessarily shared in community, this "communication" is necessarily never finished, can constitutionally never be completed as a "work," and thus itself occurs precisely *as* finitude. As opposed, then, to the always already completed work of myth (which can never say what it has not yet said), the interruption of myth that is "literature" takes place as "the inscription of our infinite resistance" (198) to the totalizing myth of immanent community, the irrepressible but unsublatable liminality of social interaction that is community at loose ends, or what Nancy calls in an eloquent and provocative turn of phrase, "literary communism."

In his essay "On Being-in-Common," included in this volume, Nancy pursues his exposition of the liminal logic of community while explicitly abandoning the expression "literary communism" because of "its equivocal character," which he says sounds too much like some "romantic literary society" or a "community of letters." Rearticulating the Heideggerian category of *Mitsein*, Nancy advocates a communitarian logic that would understand "that the 'mit' does not modify the 'sein,' . . . does not even qualify the 'Dasein,' but that it constitutes it essentially." Such a *Mit-da-sein* or *seindamit* would take place at a level prior to the relation between being and sense, or even prior to relation itself, for the term relation already appears too external and hence would correlatively presuppose an already-constituted interiority of being, for which any "relation" to the henceforth exterior world would occur as if a mere accident to its essence.

For Nancy, however, and still in a Heideggerian register, "essence is itself exist-ence," necessarily finite and singular each time it occurs. To think community "existentially," if you will, or non-essentially, then, is to admit that "there is no communion, there is no common being, but there is being *in* common." If there is no *sein* without *mit*, then "the question should be the community of being, and not the being of community. Or if you prefer: the community of existence, and not the essence of community." What Nancy is suggesting is that the challenge of community is not to understand it in terms of some common being whose im-manent exposition it would be, but rather to think the difficult but necessary question of what the *in* of being *in* common means. And as Nancy further spec-ifies, the philosophical consequences of such thinking are no less staggering:

> Once ontology becomes this logic of being in itself as being *to* itself, all ontology can be reduced to the *in*-common of the *unto*-itself. . . . The meaning of being is not common, and yet the *in*-common of being transperces all meaning. To put it in another way: existence *is* only in being partitioned and shared. But this partition, which we could call the "unto-itselfness" of existence, does not distribute a substance or a common meaning. It parcels out only the exposition of being, the declension of self, the faceless trembling of exposed identity: *we* are what it divides and parcels out.

What Nancy then locates as the task of exposing or expositing this *in* (whose status as fundamental makes it radically unexposable) is not simply to engage in "a description of the status quo" or even of "a kind of democratic noumenon entrenched behind any sociopolitical phenomenon," a kind of zero-degree egal-itarianism in the mutual encountering of our singularities: "It is nothing of the kind. Whatever is not democracy either exposes nothing (tyranny, dictatorship), or else presents an essence of being and of common meaning (totalitarian imma-nence). But democracy, for its part, exposes only that such an essence is inex-posable." Rather, to expose the *in* of being in common is to enable thought itself to "risk itself and abandon itself to 'community,' and 'community' to 'thought.'" It is to respond to what Nancy considers a categorical imperative, common to both "philosophy" and "community," and "anterior to all morality (but politically without ambiguity, for politics in this sense precedes all morality, instead of succeeding it or accommodating it), a categorical imperative not to let go of sense *in* common."

In her commentary on Nancy's text, Peggy Kamuf rehearses the difficulty of pursuing such a logic of the limit, of thinking "on the limit." The difficulty is to think the limit not as constrictive or restrictive but also as foundational, as the very condition of possibility for such differences as those between proper and improper, being and not-being, presentation and representation, or between the exposition and the exposed. Commensurate with the philosophical difficulty of

exposing the inexposable *in* of "being-in-common" is then, as Kamuf suggests, the political one of displacing, through such a thought of or on the limit, "not just the idea of critique, but the idea of democracy. . . . Unless 'critique' and 'democracy' are or can be displaced names for each other."

Elaborating on another of Nancy's insights in *La Communauté désoeuvrée*, concerning the structural inaudibility of the testimony to the absence of community, Christopher Fynsk critically examines Richard Rorty's notion of "edification" to display its unexamined presuppositions: a consensus theory of community that ignores the disruptive effects of language in the singularity of its articulations and a critique of representation from which the subject of representation itself would nonetheless be "saved." Whence Rorty's liberalism and concomitantly "aggressive dismissals of discourses with a political agenda that seek to interrupt or exceed the horizon of signification." Articulating the concerns of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Benjamin, Fynsk then argues the urgency of a "politically effective language" that acts "as a kind of intervention in language by which the essence of language itself is brought into play." Concludes Fynsk, "When theory or criticism answers to language, they become a practice: the writing of community."

In deconstructing the essentialism and immanentism that command traditional concepts of community, the essays by Nancy, Kamuf, and Fynsk adumbrate the urgency of rethinking our notions of the social and the political on the basis of and from an understanding of community *as* limit or liminality, of rethinking them not from some abstract commonality but from the illimitable network of "loose ends" that mark the communitarian relation as what we necessarily already have *in* common.

It is by mobilizing such a thought of the limit that my essay seeks to rearticulate the concept of "communism," first denounced by Nancy as one of the chief examples of the myth of immanence, and then rehabilitated with the qualification of "literary" to designate the foundational liminality of community. Drawing heavily on Lyotard's reading of Kripke in *The Differend*, I focus on the name as the very *limit* of language to the extent that its "rigidly designative" function *across* the singularity of phrase universes does not exclude the ineradicable contingency with which one name can receive different meanings. It is this structural contingency that allows for the struggle over the meaning of a name to assume a political dimension. Questioning the validity of limiting this analysis to unambiguously proper names, I examine the case of a word at the very limit of the name, a word whose sense is also eminently rife with political contestation, and whose indefinite location between proper name and common noun is doubled by its evocation of a community where everything is held in common, namely "communism." With the help of Laclau and Mouffe's analysis of communist rhetoric, a communist "pragmatics" is delineated from the Popular Front practice of enumerating the names of its constituents, thus placing them in a relation

of equivalence. It is this "expansive logic of equivalence" that defines communism as an "egalitarian horizon," to which we can never fully accede, and whose name therefore also remains an irrevocable subject of differends, but whose critical unveiling of ever further levels of injustice works as a categorical imperative whose political import is not yet decided. On the other hand, the stifling of differends or the placing of checks on the expansion of equivalences risks the return of dangerous forms of immanence. The restrictive bounds of the nation-state are thus seen, for example, to deform many a struggle for autonomy into the exclusivist essentialism of local communities.

Lyotard's concept of the "differend" is thus seen to intersect productively with Nancy's insistence on finitude and liminality as the ground from which to think community, not as the tyranny of imposed consensus but as the very play of *differences* or "loose ends" that defines our being together, not necessarily as one (*com-unus*), but as our being both together and separate, as our being both together and apart even when we are together, as *our being in common precisely through the commonality of our differences*. For several years now, perhaps most visibly in *The Postmodern Condition* and in a series of polemics with Habermas, Lyotard has insisted upon the necessity to think the social bond today not in terms of consensus, but rather in terms of a dissension whose persistence is not to be seen as some kind of failed or flawed consensus whose demise is to be mourned but as the very stuff of politics, its pleasure and pain, its comedy and tragedy. *The Differend* is, no doubt, his most elaborate and rigorous inquiry into this question. By a differend, Lyotard means more than the regulatable debate or dispute that the word *différend* typically denotes in French, more even than a mutual set of misunderstandings that the Habermassian Band-Aid of dialogue could resolve; the differend is a disagreement so structured that its resolution in the idiom of one of the two parties (or even in the idiom of some third party) necessarily wrongs the other party. In other words, the differend is precisely that which *cannot* be reduced to a consensus, or what remains left out of a consensus and betrays what is really at stake in the disagreement, the very source or occasion of the dispute. As such, the "resolution" or aggravation of differends becomes a difficult political or ethical as well as philosophical issue. To borrow the example that motivates much of this book, that of the Nazi genocide of the Jews, the "dispute" between S.S. and deportees (if we can call it that by so unjustly anodyne an expression) is egregiously *not* something to be mediated through the compromise solution of a consensus, when the enormity of the Nazi crime is such as to obviate the very possibility of dialogue, whether by the physical extermination of the interlocutor, or by impugning the evidence of the survivor's testimony. Rather than the kind of community typified by National Socialism or by the Cashinahua Indians of South America and characterized by a mythic narration of itself as an exclusive humanity that intolerantly relegates all other humans to the status of the inhuman, the ethical and political ideal would be to establish a social arrange-

ment that gives the differend "its due," either by the invention of new idioms
that could phrase with justice the wrong that remains unarticulated or by ac-
knowledging the justness of the differend's inability to be phrased. In any case,
the ethical imperative guiding the philosopher, the "moral politician," even the
artist, is to listen to what as yet remains inaudible beneath the sound and the fury
of official politics, to the differend that remains smothered even, or especially,
under the legal façade of litigation and the law.

Such a political *écoute* conjures up the image of the political philosopher as
psychoanalyst of the community, and indeed in his contribution to this volume,
Lyotard recodes the structured incommunicability and injustice of the differend
in a register that also replaces the Heideggerian theme of finitude which informs
Nancy's work with that of the Freudian unconscious as socially structuring agent.
Written to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of May '68, "À l'insu (Un-
beknownst)" is explicitly addressed to the unknown, to "the thing" that remains
repressed by and "unbeknownst" to the polis, understood as the overtly politi-
cal, civic, or legal apparatus of the social: the ego and superego of the commu-
nity's "soul." As such, a political unconscious is formed by what the polis "for-
gets," and it must forget something, for it cannot possibly manage everything,
which is what fascism delusionally tried to do even as it reproduced "within it-
self, in the anatomy and physiology of its national body politic, the illness that it
claim[ed] to cure," that is, the inner schisms and vertiginous feuding hidden be-
hind the totalitarian state's "delirium and arrogance." All politics, says Lyotard,
is "a politics of forgetting," not because politics has some "intention to make
forgotten," but by the structural necessity of what it can neither manage, treat,
nor represent, and which henceforth persists as what Freud would call an "un-
conscious affect," and what Lyotard here calls "the thing." Not to be confused
with some version of ideology or social imaginary, the "thing" is precisely what
escapes politics and cannot be managed by it, yet what can return to it as what
must be "absolutely gotten rid of" by its very unbearability and repulsiveness
(which also constitute its attractiveness) to the political order that repressed it.
Hence, its solicitation of "a kind of paranoia" in its uncanny return, which mo-
tivates the irrational energy of xenophobia, purges, denunciations, show trials,
and final solutions. Yet all these attempts to manage or link this irrepressible
thing onto the chain of politics "only inspires yet more unleashing." Revolu-
tions, too, "are attempts to approach it, to make the community more faithful to
what, unbeknownst to it, inhabits it," yet this fidelity of the revolution to the
thing is also and necessarily an infidelity or betrayal of it by the "attempt to reg-
ulate, to suppress, to efface the effects that the thing engenders." Marxian rev-
olution, for example, means a "fidelity to the non-enchained" creative energy of
labor power before it would have been bound, chained, and exploited through the
workplace contract as it occurs under "the capitalist organization of being to-
gether."

For Lyotard, the events of May '68 were marked by a similar fidelity to the thing— here childhood, understood not as "a collective infantile regression" nor as the primarily youthful age of its participants, but as the "childhood" of the mind, the "enigma that the mind existed 'before' existing" as conscious subject, the dispossession that preceded the earliest sense of one's self-possession, its "dependence." From the adult point of view, the wrong felt by childhood seems absurd, ridiculous, and certainly not deserving of "serious" attention. We thus have the situation of a differend, for the adult idiom cannot resolve the differend without wronging the child's: "In the mind, childhood is not happiness and in-nocence, but the state of dependency. Childhood itself seeks to rid itself of that state and become 'grown-up.' It does not give evidence of its irresponsibility as a self-flattery, but as a complaint. May '68 sighed the lament of an incurable suffering, the suffering of not having been born free." "Mourning" the impos-sibility of a revolution that would be absolutely faithful to the thing, recognizing that the return of official political discourse also marked the end of the May '68 events, that "politics will never be anything but the art of the possible," and that the West persists in "its work of managing the unmanageable [*traitement de l'in-traitable*]," Lyotard's text would thus nonetheless seem to locate what is most momentously (and unpredictably) political precisely where (official) politics is not. As he asks, "Are there other politics — other than revolutionary — that would make it possible not to be unfaithful to the thing that inhabits the polis uncon-sciously?"

Such a question is subtended by an imperative of fidelity to the "otherness" of this thing, an imperative that implicitly adumbrates a primordiality of ethics over politics which recalls the work of Emmanuel Lévinas, a philosopher whose thought has determinately inflected Lyotard's reflections on the necessity of dis-sension within communities. Against the epistemological point of view that can know the other only by denying its otherness, Lévinas posits a radically different kind of relation grounded in the "face-to-face encounter with the other" as what precedes any epistemological reduction. Not simply knowable, but not for that matter impalpable, the intersubjective *situation* is inaugural of ethics, and by ne-cessity, of any thought of community. Writing then in an explicitly situational and autobiographical mode, Verena Andermatt Conley reflects via image as well as word on the sweepingly disruptive effects postmodern economic and teleological relations are wreaking on communities of all sorts, but especially on an intellec-tual and artistic community blind to its own powerlessness even as it impervi-ously prescribes to its own the urgency of being both "affirmative and contesta-tory." This "crisis" in intellectual life can only be resolved and the high-tech world of "infotainment" be resisted if theorists face up to the powerful ubiquity of an economic genre "of which we are also a part." As if to rejoin Lévinas and Lyotard, Conley intimates that the inaugural situation of ethics is itself *already* situated within the economic situation that we associate today with postindustrial

capitalism, and whose basic exploitative mechanisms and effects have (as Lyotard has argued for many years) manifestly transcended the realm of the traditionally or strictly economical to pervade the ''new'' postmodern markets of aesthetics, sexuality, and knowledge, once the putative domains of nonquantitative concerns.

The difficulty of separating the ethical from the political, the economic from the ethical, the political from the economical, is also addressed in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, especially *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, by their insistence on the primacy of the political as such over and beyond any reified notions of class, economy, ethics, or community. For them, the current theoretical problem that most seriously needs to be addressed is not the capitalist production of new markets but the rise of ''new social movements'' (feminism, ecology, civil rights, gay rights, antinuclear) whose appearance and impact on the contemporary political scene can no longer be registered simply in terms of exploited labor power. Rejecting what they see as the essentialism of classic Marxist theories of historical and economic determinism, they redefine the Gramscian notion of hegemony as a specifically *political* logic that articulates different social sectors or identities (what they call subject positions) into historical blocs that are less necessary than contingent. Insisting upon the early Althusser's Lacanian conception of social relations as ''overdetermined,'' that is, of ''the incomplete, open and politically negotiable character of every identity'' (*Hegemony*, 104), Laclau and Mouffe deny any ultimate suturing of the social into a totality that can be grasped as such. Going further in this respect than either Nancy or Lyotard in the latter's suspicion of abstract concepts of the social or communal whole that would totalize and reduce the field of social differences, Laclau and Mouffe categorically state, in one of their most infamous formulations, that '''society' is impossible'' (*Hegemony*, 114). This is because, for them, the social is nothing but the articulation of different subject positions, which consists, to cite the Lacanian language that is so often theirs, in ''the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning.'' Hegemony is thus to be thought *not* in the mundane and negative sense of some kind of despotic oppression achieved by one group over all others but positively as a *partial and provisional* cathexis of social identities that binds together *some* of the ''loose ends'' into an alignment that remains historically and politically contingent. What Laclau and Mouffe call the ''deconstructive logic'' of hegemony introduces ''the horizon of an impossible totality'' into the social through the play of overdetermination between the dispersed subject positions it articulates even as it disallows any one of them from consolidating itself into the separate and transcendent position of a subject, such as in the traditional Marxist view of the proletariat as revolutionary subject, as the uniquely empowered and solely legitimate agent of social change. While Laclau and Mouffe do not, as some contend, go so far as utterly to dispense with the class subject position of alienated labor, they do sit-

uate it, however, as only one among numerous other subject positions (typified in the new social movements of the late twentieth century) in search of hegemonic articulation. There is, nonetheless, a motivation for what would otherwise be an absolutely free-moving and thus ultimately undetermined theory of social interaction, namely what Laclau and Mouffe call "antagonism," by which they mean a conflict, not between preexisting identities, but between identities whose self-definitions are mutually undone and hence irresolvable within their current social formation. Antagonism is, as they say, the " 'experience' of the limit of the social," a "witness of the impossibility of a final suture," and thus it constitutes "the limits of society, the latter's impossibility of fully constituting itself" (*Hegemony*, 125). Whence, the urgency of rearticulating subject positions through relations of difference and equivalence into a new hegemonic formation, whose triumph in no way precludes the advent of new antagonisms (or even the persistence of old ones). The theoretical elaboration of the concept of hegemony, as carried out by Laclau and Mouffe, while recognizing that the progress of history can never be assured or assumed and that past gains can always be subverted (i.e., the revolution is a myth), also underscores the urgency of a creative political engagement whose horizon is that of a "radical and plural democracy," to be achieved not by the mechanical unfolding of a historical narrative, but through an endlessly critical vigilance.

Thus, while the conflictual situation of antagonism and the practice of hegemonic articulation echo Lyotard's invention of "new idioms" to phrase the incommunicable wrong felt in a differend, what one could call a post-Marxist differend can also be heard in the difference between Lyotard's nearly limitless extension of the economic, insistence upon the ethical, and suspicion of official politics, on the one hand, and Laclau and Mouffe's restriction (some would say scandalous elimination) of the economic, insistence upon the political, and suspicion of the discourse of ethics, on the other hand.

Chantal Mouffe brings the question of the relation between the ethical and the political to the fore in her discussion of the category of "citizen." These remarks are situated in the debate raging among contemporary political philosophers between those who, defending a "Kantian" liberalist view, argue for the priority of individual rights over any common good as well as for a theory of personal liberty "understood in a negative way as absence of coercion," and those "communitarian" proponents of a civic republicanism whose participatory ideal of citizenship is understood in terms of the advancement toward a "substantive idea of the common good" that is, in turn, the organizing principle behind the cohesion of the political community. While the former view, with its insistence on the split between public and private, has "reduced citizenship to a mere legal status" and thus de-emphasized the "ideas of public-spiritedness, civic activity, and political participation," its historic success in the last few centuries has also incontrovertibly contributed to the spread of democratic principles in ways that are unthink-

able from the premodern perspective of "republican virtue." Rejecting the claim that these two positions are incompatible, Mouffe seeks to "reestablish the lost connection between ethics and politics. . . . We should not accept a false dichotomy between individual liberty and rights on one side versus civic activity and political community on the other. Our choice is not at all between an aggregate of individuals without common public concern and a premodern community organized around a single substantive idea of the common good. How to envisage the modern democratic political community outside this dichotomy is the crucial question." The alternative is to see citizenship "not as a legal status but as a form of identification, a type of political identity: something to be constructed, not empirically given." This should allow for a discourse about community that still implies an "ethico-political bond" without positing the existence of any single common good: "Antagonistic forces will never disappear, and politics is characterized by conflict and division. Forms of agreement can be reached, but they are always partial and provisional since consensus is by necessity based upon acts of exclusion." Incorporating "the psychoanalytic insight that all identities are forms of identification," Mouffe argues that the social agent or citizen must be conceived anew according to such a political understanding:

> [The citizen] is a common political identity of persons who might be engaged in many different purposive enterprises and with differing conceptions of the good, but who accept submission to the rules prescribed by the *respublica* in seeking their satisfactions and in performing their actions. What binds them together is their common recognition of a set of ethico-political values. In this case, citizenship is not just one identity among others—as in liberalism—or the dominant identity that overrides all others—as in civic republicanism. It is an articulating principle that affects the different subject positions of the social agent . . . while allowing for a plurality of specific allegiances and for the respect of individual liberty.

Such a view of citizenship is aligned with postmodern critiques of rationalism and universalism to the extent that it "rejects the idea of an abstract universalist definition of the public" and of its putative opposition to the "domain of the private seen as the realm of particularity and difference," an opposition whose adumbration has also served to identify "the private with the domestic and played an important role in the subordination of women." The "exercise of citizenship" thus "consists [not] in adopting a universal point of view, made equivalent to Reason and reserved for men" but in identifying with the "ethico-political principles of modern democracy." In terms of the "never-ending" "struggle for the deepening of the democratic revolution," such a radically democratic concept of citizenship means that "no sphere is immune" from "a concern with equality and liberty" and that "relations of domination can be challenged every-

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where." It therefore also reconciles "the ideal of rights and pluralism with the ideas of public-spiritedness and ethico-political concern."

But if this notion of the citizen thus designates a possible nodal point in the constitution of a radical democratic hegemony, there still remains the question of how a particular felt antagonism may get articulated at the citizenly level through communal action, especially if the negativity that is antagonism also constitutes the very limit of community. To the extent that the limits of legitimate social or political change then become an issue, the question raised is, in classic terms, that of the difference between reform and revolution. Taking issue (as does Fynsk) with the "liberal utopianism" of Richard Rorty, Ernesto Laclau displaces the opposition, on the one hand, by categorically rejecting the "foundationalist" myth of a revolution that would claim the pristine ground of an impossibly total overturning of a whole society, and on the other hand, by espousing a concept of reform that does not exclude the role of violence. Deconstructing Rorty's liberalist opposition between (legitimate, democratic) persuasion and (illegitimate, undemocratic) force, Laclau argues that not only is persuasion a "form of force" but also that "the existence of violence and antagonism is the very condition of a free society." This is because society is not, as in the "revolutionary" or foundationalist point of view, built upon some one focal point that can be founded anew but is "pragmatically constructed from many starting points." The necessary antagonisms that ensue also describe the very limit and condition of the social in its radically democratic sense, the "first paradox of a free community." As such, the theoretical problem of democratic politics is not the "elimination of power" as it is for a liberal like Rorty but the conceptualization of "the forms of power that are compatible with democracy." Such a conceptualization is to be found in the theory of hegemony as the contingent articulation of political identities, for such an articulation does not exclude but rather grounds its own possibility in the very existence of antagonisms. Similarly, debates about the optimal relation between the public and the private need to be displaced in favor of a political discourse that stresses the necessity in a democratic society for there being *multiple* public spaces. Finally, the universalist values that underpin much liberalist thinking need less to be abandoned (or "ironized," as Rorty would have it) than historicized in terms of their pragmatic necessity for the initial formation of democratic institutions. Such a historicist recasting will thus reveal the "historicity of Being" and "the contingent character of universalist values" in ways that should encourage human beings to see themselves less as the pawns of destiny than as the collective agents of their fate.

Commenting upon the work of both Laclau and Mouffe, Paul Smith challenges them to evolve a more positive version of the subject, lest the post-Marxist denial of strict determinism fall into quietism. By reference to the work of Alain Touraine, Smith returns to a privileging of the political understood as the ensemble of social processes captured in overdetermined relations. Notwithstanding the

rejection of essentialism and totalization, Smith defends a notion of identity based upon a subject's particular capacities for action. This capacity Smith sees as consistent with the historicity of subject positions themselves, owing to his view that discourse is historical not just in its syntagmatic but in its paradigmatic relation as well. If some notion of agency is to be conceptualized, Smith argues for theorizing the subject's relation to the modern state and for retaining traditional concepts like party, class, and identity.

Also urging a return to traditional Marxist categories, notably the dialectic, is Richard Terdiman's argument presented here that the poststructuralist/postmodernist thought of Nancy and Lyotard, among others, militates delusionally against any and all forms of relationship and determination. Yet in its desire to free the play of textuality from all possible constraints, poststructuralism would not only fail to recognize its own counterdiscursive relation to the nineteenth-century metanarratives of Hegel and Marx as that *against which* it is written, but it also invents as problems precisely those categories dialectical thought had as its purpose to explain: history (as "diachronic and deterministic") and community (as "synchronic and deterministic"). Its radicalism thwarted by its absolute insistence on the absence of relation and determination, poststructuralism cannot therefore think history and community — which, concludes Terdiman, "however problematical, may be more thinkable than we thought."

While some may well disagree with Terdiman's characterization of poststructuralism as antirelational, his essay's signal merit is to bring into sharp relief the question of the *determination* of relation as the important theoretical question that imposes itself in the aftermath of Nancy's deconstruction of community as an essence immanent unto itself and his foregrounding of the *relation* of being together as foundational. And while, Terdiman notwithstanding, all of the contributors to this volume agree that community must be thought relationally, the kinds of relational logic they privilege and/or put to work are as varied and as numerous as the contributors themselves: dialectical, contingent, causal, overdetermined, structural, equivalential, hegemonic, differential, liminal, unconscious or libidinal, and so forth. To think community no longer as a foundational or immanent *com-unus* but as inaugurated and sustained in difference is thus no idle complication but a determined way to raise new questions and chart alternative possibilities about what it is for us to be together, about what it means for us to have in common above all the commonality of our difference.

The communitarian relation is not, however — as the contributors also all know — just something to be "thought" or theorized in the abstract; it is also what must be confronted and engaged as the concrete materiality within which "we" are all necessarily and always already inscribed. The fact that we are "we" (that is, part of some larger social unit) literally even before any of us can be said to be an "I" speaks to the exigency of thinking *from* the communal and not toward it as if it were a mere extension of the "I." But the shifting, disso-

nant, even conflictual ''we'' that has brought forth this volume knows that it too is no more than a ragged, indeterminate, but potentially illimited community at loose ends, whether that ''we'' be taken to refer to the conference's small organizing and editorial committee, its variably sized reading groups, its larger collectivity of colloquium participants and audience, or to the wider public of readers we hope our work will prompt to engage in further discussion of what our being-together can and should mean. Having thus grappled on the practical as well as the theoretical level with the necessity of dissonance in this collective project, we draw the crucial lesson, even as we write, that ''we'' always speaks with more than one voice. For even ''I'' who write this Introduction could not have done without the helpful ideas, suggestions, and, indeed, words of others (especially Peggy Kamuf, Steve Nimis, and Mitchell Greenberg, but also Britton Harwood, Marie-Claire Vallois, Peter Rose, Juliana Schiesari, Linda Singer, Verena Andermatt Conley, Tom Conley, and James Creech).

Though some may feel dismay at the lack of more specific attention to communities in which ''they'' as well as ''we'' may belong (women, men, blacks, browns, whites, immigrants, gays, intellectuals, etc.), the intervention ''we'' claim is precisely on and at a theoretical, even willfully abstract, level that is also (and necessarily) the fundamental as well as the practical one of ''our'' experience. *Community at Loose Ends* is thus not an answer to the question but a questioning of some contemporary ''answers'' that seeks to demarcate the parameters of a discussion this volume can only hope to set in motion.

Note

1. Portions published as *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).