COMMUNITY

COMMUNITY AT LOOSE ENDS

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On the Dialectics of Postdialectical Thinking

Richard Terdiman

In the paper he presented to this colloquium, Jean-François Lyotard told us there was no dialectic. But I want to claim there was a dialectic in what he told us. (I also want to say that I found what he told us moving — *émouvant* — and important.) And I want to make a further point, or point further. Or, with respect, to point Jean-François Lyotard further. And along with him something that I will be calling — with blissful imprecision — poststructuralism.

Poststructuralism's power seems to me rooted in some fundamental paradoxes. Poststructuralism is a fundamentally anti-essentialist mode of thinking. I would argue that its essential element is the *radicalism* of its attempt to free itself from roots themselves — from the determinations they exert. But I am going to claim that poststructuralism's radicalism is significantly fissured or incomplete. In terms of some of my earlier work, I could say that poststructuralism strives to *escape* the status of the counter-discursive.[1] That is, it seeks to evade any determination that would ventriloquize or pre-script its expression, its "phrasing." It seeks even to avoid the relationship of *negation* of other, constituted discourses. It projects not binding but freeing. But my claim will be that poststructuralism's project has been something like a neurotic or overdetermined reaction to a previously constituted discourse. Or to frame my urging along the lines of an earlier and celebrated call to revolutionary liberation, that this brilliant and salutary latter-day example of the liberatory impulse — I mean poststructuralism — has still to make one more effort to be free. (For this earlier adjuration, see D. A. F. Sade, *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, 5th dialogue.)

Some people denounce poststructuralism because they claim it is idealist. They argue that poststructuralist thinking resists cognizing, resists responding to developments in what they term the "material" world. By "material world" they seem to mean a world somehow distant from the conceptual, and one that, whatever we think about it, retains some independence from what we think. They would agree that our concepts construct the world for us—of course—but they would resist the notion that such construction is completely free, arbitrary, or under our own control. Poststructuralism they see as too hermetic, too absorbed in its own paradigms, allowing too little of the outside to infiltrate and disturb or drive their development. In effect they condemn poststructuralism for epistemological endogamy, for empirical underdevelopment, for conceptual overdetermination.

The objection I have just formulated against poststructuralism is too simple. I am sure that everyone at this colloquium could neatly deconstruct the opposition between the ideal and the material realms upon which it rests. Yet *something* is being argued in this criticism concerning the thinking of some of our principal interlocutors at this conference. To reframe the denunciation I have put in the mouths of these anti-poststructuralist critics, we might say that poststructuralism has some very definite and very restrictive notions about what forms of relation are acceptable in conceptual discourse—and, more to the point here, about what forms of relation are illegitimate.

Let me begin to test this perception and this critique by turning to the issue that frames our discussion at this colloquium. Today it would seem that the problem of community has a clearly determined conjunctural pertinence—namely, the disappearance of our sense of the collective. Social solidarity seems an idealization from some prelapsarian world, a world we distinctly appear to have lost. So the emergence of our question about community quietly supposes a paradigm of what we used to call *history*.

Critics of poststructuralism would likely argue that, as it has predominantly been framed in some of the work upon which this conference is based, the problem of community is largely an *intralinguistic effect*, that it is the predictable product of certain doctrines operating within the conceptual field of poststructuralism itself. Rather than responding to changes in sociopolitical experience, or in the status or possibility of collective experience, they would claim that the crisis of community as poststructuralists view it is nothing more mysterious than the predictable result of the deep mistrust, within this mode of thinking, concerning *any* category of totality. So, again invoking a pairing whose stability poststructuralists would question, the claim would be that the crisis of community is a deducible effect of certain poststructuralist conceptual proclivities, and has no necessary empirical or sociohistorical basis at all.

On this view, the notion that poststructuralists were responding to developments (as we might say) "in society" would represent a fundamental metalepsis.

We need to ask what would happen if it turned out that our uneasiness about community really represents an adjustment to the suspicion concerning principles of relation that is one of the most characteristic elements in the poststructuralist complex. Would this mean that "historical conjuncture" had nothing to do with it?

In any case, it is clear that our disquiet about community strikingly intertwines with contemporary suspicions concerning *history*. In effect, Jean-Luc Nancy acknowledges and foregrounds this point in the opening paragraph of *La Communauté désoeuvrée*. There we are told that history hardly exists any more. Nancy confidently evokes its exhaustion (11). What is at stake in such a pronouncement?

If we consider the several logics of the differend, of hegemony, even of transgression or of ecstasy, which our principal interlocutors at this conference have offered to help us theorize what they claim is our withered experience of community, they have a common trait: they refuse to countenance the sort of metanarrative or metadiscourse that, as we once naively said, could "bring people together" or "make sense" of history. To our interlocutors here, such explanatory, framing paradigms, and the relations they insist upon, are unacceptable. Thus, in a notion like Jean-François Lyotard's "link" — enchaînement — elements of discourse are conceived as cohering only in terms of the most attenuated form of connection, a kind of zero-degree logic of succession. *Post hoc*, but *never propter hoc*. In this reading, to an extent that may be unprecedented since the High Middle Ages, history is transformed into a narrative of radical parataxis. In poststructuralist diegesis we unexpectedly find ourselves reliving the logic of the *Song of Roland*.

Well, not exactly. For the eleventh century and the *Roland*, meaning was guaranteed by a cultural assumption of the doctrine of the Logos, according to which signs pointed unerringly and unproblematically to their divine referents. So no force of causality or of teleology had to be or really *could* be represented within narrative; all determination flowed from the ineffable world beyond the text, and unceasingly referred it back to such transcendence. This was a world of *parole pleine* to which we can claim no access today. Quoting Thales, Jean-Luc Nancy speaks of a similarly enlarged semiosis in Greek society: *panta plere theon*, "all things full of the gods." And maybe even with a trace of nostalgia Nancy identifies this "uninterrupted world of presences" as responsible for what he terms the greatness (*grandeur*) of the Greeks (124).

In our period, on the other hand, it has come to seem that signs point to nothing at all, or at most only to themselves. Yet unexpectedly the effect is parallel: in the medieval case meaning referred unambiguously to an inaccessible realm by virtue of its absolute transcendence; in the contemporary case there is no longer a division, bridgeable or not, between sign and significance, since — absent the metadiscourse and the extrasemiotic realm — there is no stable signif-

icance to begin with. In terms of our old ambitions about history, meaning has become irrelevant, and we are left not with history but with chronicle — with the Lyotardian "link."

In a poignant reappropriation of Bataille, Jean-Luc Nancy evokes this paradigm of an unending, untotalizable succession. In response to our uncertainty concerning community, with Bataille Jean-Luc Nancy tells us that "nous ne pouvons qu'aller plus loin" (68, 102). "We can only go further." This rather Beckettian apothegm we must take as the contemporary version of an answer to Lenin's "What is to be done?" Just go on. But what makes this sentence poignant is Jean-Luc Nancy's *repetition* of it at the conclusion — indeed his repetition of it *is* the conclusion — of *La Communauté désoeuvrée*. What does this iteration do?

Such repetition, such return of the same, effectively subverts any dynamic of temporal flow, of political project, of conceptual *process*, which we might have felt at work in the text. We can only go further. But by literally *repeating* the very sentence that makes the claim, the text subverts it. It seems unable to follow its own injunction. The hortatory tone ("We can only . . .") would appear to project us, but toward what project are we urged? Bataille's project? Nancy's project? Some immanent project joining the two of them and us in some ineffable community? In other words, further than *what*? Essentially this reappropriative, citational move tends to transform the time-sensitive dialectic of social activity — and remember, it is *community* we are worrying about here — into a logic, into tautology. We go on, but our *going* does not *go*. So appropriating the Bataille quotation about going to conclude the text is really a way of enacting stasis. It bleaches out *time*.

Such elision of the diachronic, of the productive character of temporality, is consonant with poststructuralism's claim that the contemporary period has evacuated the discourse of history. Why have we given up history?

History is a *constraint*. Any metadiscourse speaks us, and in a world characterized by increasing programmation and penetration of discourses, we experience any prior scripting, any form of transcendent control, as what Bourdieu would call "symbolic violence" (*Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 191), as an insult, as what I will call a "servitude."

The middle-class ideal of liberty that has animated much of the social project in the period since the French Revolution is thus still very much alive in contemporary theory. As the eighteenth-century revolutionaries sought to be free from feudal exactions, we would like to be free of metadiscourses. But it would be important to ask whether today the project of purging the conceptual realm of its epistemological and ontological servitudes is not a defense, a screen, the cultural or conceptual equivalent of a neurotic substitution, for more intractable social complications. There may be other, less cerebral servitudes, other forms of ex-

action, that cramp us—though admittedly contesting *them* would involve less cerebral modes of action.

Why do I refuse positivity to the discourses of our prestigious interlocutors at this colloquium, to poststructuralism generally? Why my insistence on considering poststructuralism in its various strains as a rather closely determined counterdiscourse to the concerted historicizing, intensely metadiscursive pretensions of nineteenth-century dialectics? The answer is that I read counterdiscursivity, reactivity, in the very matter of poststructuralism's concepts, and at the very heart of its practices. They are driven by negativity; they define themselves *against*, though they are not always overt in doing so.

Of course the poststructuralists' consciousness of the links between their own protocols and the period of transformation in which we are living, their self-representation, their own metadiscourse if you will, is theoretically no more authoritative than any other. They would argue the point as part of a principled resistance to any constituted authority. Earlier conceptual paradigms, however, would have deprivileged their self-conception for more conjunctural reasons. There is a nice text of Marx's from the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that puts this deprivileging strikingly: "Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks of himself, so one cannot judge a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained" (21).

So I am tentatively declining the anti-historicist or anti-historical dynamics within poststructuralism. I want to transcode the discourses that assert or practice them in the light of such a refusal. To be sure, such transcoding is not in itself a scandal. On the contrary, the mobility, the *différance* of signs ceaselessly asserts nothing else. But with a flat-footedness for which I apologize, my transcoding reintroduces the kind of metaconsciousness that underlies an assertion of *meaning*. I want to privilege certain forms of relation in a way that violates the practices characteristic of poststructuralism.

The discourse of fundamental forms of relation we could call "logic." The poststructuralist logics that are of concern to us have in common a will to question the forms of relation that can be posited in or about social existence. In such an atmosphere, a regularity emerges clearly. The logic suspicious of community and the logic doubtful of history both call into question fundamental notions or forms of relation. In the case of history, such relations are, broadly speaking, diachronic and deterministic. In the case of community they are, broadly speaking, synchronic and deterministic. The poststructuralist logics before us here wish to deny the pertinence or the validity of forms of relation traditionally posited in the discourses of history and of community. Their object, and their strategy, is to evacuate the category of determination. Under this treatment and *because of it*, important conceptual entities become disabled or *désoeuvrées*: communities collapse and history falls apart.

Some poststructuralists would claim that these effects are *not* simply generated out of the logic that their conceptual practices prescribe. Rather, they would see them as symptomatic of the same developments that led to the generation of such a logic to begin with. In effect, in this view poststructuralism is cast as the consciousness appropriate to our postmodern world. But if we say that, then we are building back into the circuit of admissible relations something like the nineteenth-century explanatory dialectic that on another level poststructuralists refuse. We would be speaking the language of determinism and metadiscourses again.

Perhaps, under poststructuralist assumptions, it makes no sense to ask whether the material world is independent of the conceptual. But the enterprise of philosophy — which we could hardly imagine to be coterminous with the entire conceptual world — is a more local, a more circumscribed phenomenon. We might then ask whether and how philosophy affects or influences social existence and collective experience. Or whether and how it submits to effects from them. If these questions have any sense at all, some further thinking about the kinds of relations that will be admissible in a poststructuralist logic would seem important.

In any case, the questions that brought us together at this colloquium involve an exquisite sensitivity to the phenomenon of relation, and particularly to the arduousness of positing its propriety. This is nowhere more evident than in the intricate rhetorics by which our principal interlocutors here have striven to define or to describe their *own* relation to the historical and conceptual inheritance of the period since the twin revolutions of the nineteenth-century — particularly to Hegel and to Marx.

These adumbrations of linkage with the philosophical and political past are emblematized in what appears as the familiar paradox of a theory — poststructuralism — that writes its relation to its inheritance in terms of a temporalizing prefix (*"post-"*). But the pertinence of this prefix to the relationship described, and the significance of the succession it denotes, are then immediately subverted in the denial that the paradigms of history can any longer produce admissible discourse.

Consider in this light the intricate self-representation by which in their introduction to *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe take the uninflected phrase "post-Marxist" and successively emphasize first one, then the other of its elements (4). The emphasis upon the first of these elements (*"post*-Marxist"*) in a sense completely undercuts its own assertion, because it supposes meaningful historical succession. It thereby reinscribes the paradigm of determinate supersession that Marxism itself has done the most to articulate. So, saying we are *beyond* Marxism simultaneously but more covertly says we are still deeply *within* Marxism. This seems to me to be why Laclau and Mouffe then immediately go on to reinflect the phrase "post-Marxist." In this

second moment they move the emphasis from "post-" to "Marxist." The effect is an attempt to recapture and recontain the paradigmatic and temporal paradox that has been put into play.

In the light of this prickly — I would say counter-discursive — relation to Marxism, to history, and to the dialectic, I think we can say to what experiential and conceptual basis the uneasiness about community corresponds. As I suggested, to postmodern sensibility any form of relation seems to incur the danger of enforcing constraint. Any social relation, once formulated and contracted, takes on a kind of authority or weight that seems to set itself over against the freedom of those who entered into it. Power arises out of relationships and inheres in them.

In this sense, relationships seem *constitutively* and irreducibly historical. If you want to refuse history, refuse relationships. For once they have been posited, agreed to, articulated, mysteriously they seem to enter a world governed by the inexorable unidirectionality of time. In such a world, servitudes analogous to those of the Second Law of Thermodynamics come into play. Everything happens as if entropy determined the social construction and experience of relation. Relations seem to *exceed* logic and *require* history. We see this when we realize that undoing a relation is considerably more problematic than its seemingly free and untrammeled positing would have led one to think. Or, to put it differently, once power is constituted, it is hard to unmake it. Something like minimalist history is implicit in that discovery.

The poststructuralist response is clear. It is to grant every discourse, every moment, every subjectivity the potential of an irreducible singularity, to hold out the privilege of absolute disconnection. No *relationship*, hence no *determination*. On the conceptual level, this move quite neatly reinstitutes freedom. But there are costs. For example, on such a view, how could community *not* be a problem? The object of the move to deny or disable relation is plain, and unquestionably praiseworthy: it is to preserve the rights and the sociopolitical force of alterity, to prevent domination by constituted power or by what some term "legitimate" authority. Against forms of domination, the stakes in such liberatory initiatives are evident. They appear clearly in this passage from Jean-François Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition*:

> The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one. . . . We can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return to terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage war on totality. (81–82)

I would agree that to the extent they carry determinative force, relations always have something like totality as their horizon. This is why, as I have suggested, any relation entails a constraint, a servitude. Yet it is not clear that the duress they imply can be avoided by placing the category of relation itself on some Index of

Prohibited Notions. There may well be an irreducible idealism in attempting to evade determination by seeking to empty out its concept.

It has been argued that the history of Stalinism and the specter of the Gulag are the real determinants of these poststructuralist positions. The quotation from Jean-François Lyotard that I have just cited suggests just this point in a barely coded way. Yet if this is so, it is less clear how appropriate such an intensely counterdiscursive perception of the contemporary political danger may really be. Nonetheless its pervasive and somewhat uncanny force can be sensed in a curious slippage at the beginning of *La Communauté désoeuvrée*. In the opening paragraph of that book, Jean-Luc Nancy strikingly misremembers Sartre's remark concerning the unsurpassable horizon of philosophy in the modern period. In *Questions de méthode* Sartre had referred to Marxism as this horizon. But via a *lapsus* Jean-Luc Nancy replaces "Marxism" with "communism" (11). In a philosopher so exquisitely sensitive to the privileges of difference as Jean-Luc Nancy, it is striking to see precisely *that* difference simply liquidated. The sorry history of the Leninist parties in Western Europe (and in France particularly) cannot give much comfort to the dwindling partisans of what now no doubt appears to us as the Very Old Left. All the less reason to concede to the Comintern the power to decide the course of contemporary Western philosophy.

But the question of community — if not of "communism" — is still before us. I would like to address it briefly. Let me begin by resurrecting the fundamental question Georg Simmel asked in 1908: "How Is Society Possible?" Simmel tried to answer it. Following Vico's distinction between the making of nature and the making of the social world, Simmel observed that, as Kant had asserted, the unity of nature emerges in the observing subject exclusively. But perception of society requires no similar outside, independent observer. Rather, the elements of society, people — who are conscious, synthesizing units — directly realize this unity. And they do so in both senses of "realize": they perceive it, and they create it (7).

You will see that via Simmel and his attribution of a synthesizing capacity to individual perception of the social world, I have smuggled in a metadiscourse, a version of "relation" that I argued earlier many poststructuralists would tend to suspect or to refuse. Perhaps one could put the issue this way: If we strive to preserve the privileges of difference, does this entail abandoning the very possibility of synthesis, of unification — in other words, of community? Here, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe implicitly come to my aid in allowing for at least provisional, nonessential, contingent production of such centripetal social and conceptual formations. That is what they call hegemony.

But how can the experience of such hegemony, of such unification, arise? Simmel makes a crucial point. He observes that no one could deny that individuals, the units of such unification, are *organized* by the larger processes of the whole. In my terms here, they are the victims of its servitudes. But Simmel goes

on to say that this "causal nexus" that operates upon them is "transformed into a teleological nexus as soon as it is considered from the perspective of . . . individuals" themselves (22). Nor is this assumption by individuals of a program that is determined partly beyond them purely a mystification. Rather, this perspectival transformation is a function of individual consciousness as much as it is a servitude imposed upon it. As Simmel puts it, the process is what "transforms [individual consciousness] into a social element." Community is something I could choose.

Let me conclude by offering a rather unexpected parallel with a different description of the process of individual consciousness. I quote a striking passage on memory from Baudelaire's "Paradis artificiels":

> Entre le palimpseste qui porte, superposées l'une sur l'autre, une tragédie grecque, une légende monacale et une histoire de chevalerie, et le palimpseste divin créé par Dieu, qui est notre incommensurable mémoire, se présente cette différence, que dans le premier il y a comme un chaos fantastique, grotesque, une collision entre des éléments hétérogènes; tandis que dans le second [la mémoire] la fatalité du tempérament met forcément une harmonie entre les éléments les plus disparates. Quelque incohérente que soit une existence, l'unité humaine n'en est pas troublée. Tous les échos de la mémoire, si on pouvait les réveiller simultanément, formeraient un concert, agréable ou douloureux, mais logique et sans dissonances. (451)
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> [An important difference exists between the palimpsest manuscript that superposes, one upon the other, a Greek tragedy, a monastic legend, and a chivalric tale, and the divine palimpsest created by God, which is our incommensurable memory: in the first there is something like a fantastic, grotesque randomness, a collision between heterogeneous elements; whereas in the second (memory) the inevitability of temperament necessarily establishes a harmony among the most disparate elements. However incoherent a given existence may be, its human unity is not upset. All the echoes of memory, if one could awaken them simultaneously, would form a concert—pleasant or painful, but logical and without dissonance (my translation).]

It is evident that this reflection on memory really represents an incipient but quite powerful theory of representation. For memory, as I have argued elsewhere, is the model for any representation, for textuality itself. From the point of view of our discourse at this colloquium and of the problem that frames it, what challenges in this striking quotation is the degree to which Baudelaire in his theory of representation explicitly clotures the free play of codes,[2] and limits the privilege of difference—which, as I have suggested, at least some would claim is responsible for our conceptual difficulties about community to begin with.

What fascinates me in Baudelaire's notion of memory is the progress he makes in adumbrating a *material* basis for a theory of textuality that would also be a theory of consciousness. His notion of consciousness as writing is explicit in the metaphor of the palimpsest. But from his image Baudelaire does not draw the postmodernist conclusion of textual liberation. Rather, he demonstrates the degree to which the stopping of the play of codes and of difference is an *inevitable*, *determined* consequence of the technologies and discourses of consciousness itself.

Texts are theoretically free, of course: anything *might* be written at any time. But in conjuncture, in context, texts are produced by determinate producers and by determinate practices. The crucial point is that whereas textuality has been taken by a number of poststructuralists as the model and the ideal of the unconstrained circulation of codes and signifiers, for Baudelaire textuality is constituted by, governed by a metadiscourse, a metadiscourse of unification — what Simmel called "synthesizing." Baudelaire's perception would suggest that the effort to eradicate such metadiscourses in order to preserve the privileges of untrammelled textuality may be contradictory or even positively delusive.

Baudelaire's assertion about the formation of sense foregrounds the degree to which, *pace* poststructuralism, the establishment of *relation* is essential to language's and to consciousness's process. Unity, community, however problematical, may be more thinkable than we thought.

Notes

1. See my *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

2. On the free play of codes, see Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. R. Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974), 140.