Community

Seeking Safety in an Insecure World

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Polity

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Two Sources of Communalism

It seems from this brief survey of the new cosmopolitanism that the successful (those who manage to reforge individuality *de jure*, a *condition* which they share with the rest of modern men and women, into individuality *de facto*, a *capacity* which sets them apart from a great number of their contemporaries) do not need community. There is little they might possibly gain from the tight web of communal obligations, and everything they might lose if caught in that web. In his greatly underrated study composed well before the idea of global hybridity and free-floating cosmopolitans had been invented and made into the folklore of the 'chattering classes',[22] Geoff Dench singled out the feature of community which prompts all those who can afford it to opt out of it: an integral part of the idea of community is the 'fraternal obligation' 'to share benefits among their members, regardless of how talented or important they are'. This feature alone makes 'communalism' 'a philosophy of the weak'. And 'the weak', we may comment, are those individuals *de jure* who are not able to practise individuality *de facto*, and so would fall by the wayside if and when the idea that people deserve what they manage to attain by their own wits and muscles (and deserve no more than that) took over from the obligation of sharing. The idea

> that merit, and only merit, must be rewarded is readily reworked into a self-congratulatory charter with which the powerful and successful can authorize generous benefits to themselves from social resources. The society open to all talents soon becomes for practical purposes one in which failure to display special ability is treated as sufficient grounds for consignment to a life of submission.

Consignment also, increasingly, to a prospectless misery, as the triumph of meritocratic ideology leads inexorably to its logical conclusion, that is to the dismantling of welfare provisions, that communal insurance against individual misfortune, or to the recasting of such provisions – once seen as a fraternal obligation without discrimination, and a universal entitlement – into a charity on the part of 'those who feel like it' targeted at 'those who need it'.

'The powerful and successful' cannot easily dispose of the meritocratic worldview without seriously affecting the social foundation of the privilege which they cherish and have no intention of surrendering. And as long as that worldview is upheld and made into the canon of public virtue, the communal principle of sharing cannot be accepted. Avarice resulting in a reluctance to reach into one's pocket is not the sole, perhaps not even the principal reason for its non-acceptability. More important things are involved than mere dislike of self-sacrifice: the very principle founding a coveted social distinction is here at stake. If anything other than imputed merit is recognized as a legitimate entitlement to the rewards on offer, that principle would lose its wondrous capacity to bestow dignity on privilege. For the 'powerful and successful', the desire for 'dignity, worth and honour' paradoxically calls for the denial of community.

However true this may be, it is not the whole truth. The 'powerful and successful' may be, *unlike* the weak and the

defeated, resentful of communal bonds – but *like* the rest of men and women they find life lived in the absence of community precarious, often dissatisfying and on occasion frightening. Freedom and communality may clash and conflict, but a compound lacking one or the other won't make for a satisfactory life.

The need for both ingredients is, if anything, felt yet more strongly because life in our fast globalizing and deregulating society which brought the new cosmopolitan elite into being, but which has been famously described by Ulrich Beck as *Risikogesellschaft*, risk society, is a *Risikoleben*, a life of risk – in which 'the very idea of controllability, certainty and security . . . collapses';[23] and because at no other social location has that certainty and security – and particularly the reassuring feeling of 'knowing for sure what is going to happen' – collapsed so spectacularly as in the underdefined, underinstitutionalized, underregulated and all too often anomic territory of exterritoriality inhabited by the new cosmopolitans. To speak of 'collapsing' would perhaps amount to offering the residual certainty too much credit. It is not as though the old maps have become outdated and no longer offer reliable orientation on this unfamiliar ground – it is rather that ordnance surveys have never been conducted, and the office that might conduct them has not been established yet, nor is likely to be in the foreseeable future. The frontierland into which the escape into exterritoriality has transported the refugees-by-choice has never been mapped; and there are no permanent features there as yet fit to be plotted on a map, were one to wish to draw it. Here, community has not 'been lost'; it was never born.

Here, there is no question of 'denying one's roots' – there are no roots to be denied. More importantly still, there is no question here of denying responsibilities to the weak – there are no weak on this side of the closely

guarded gates, let alone responsibilities for their fate. As a matter of fact, there are no hard-and-fast structures, no class origins one cannot leave behind and no past that refuses to go away or be thrown overboard. Just as it is shapeless and easily overflows any set boundary and any solid mould, the exterritorial habitat of the global elite appears soft and pliable, ready to be rolled out and kneaded by skilful hands. No one stops anyone from being what one is and no one seems to stop anyone from being someone other than one is. Identity appears to be but a matter of choice and resolution, and choices are to be respected and resolution is to be rewarded. Cosmopolitans are born, natural culturalists, culture of their brand of culturalism being an assembly of revocable conventions, the site of invention and experimentation, but above all of no points of no return.

In the book quoted above[24] Richard Rorty writes of the 'cultural Left' in America (a category by and large overlapping with the new cosmopolitan elite under discussion) that came to replace the politically committed Left of the 'great society' era, and whose many members

> specialize in what they call the 'politics of difference', or 'of identity', or 'of recognition'. This cultural Left thinks more about stigma than about money, more about deep and hidden psychosexual motivations than about shallow and evident greed . . . [That 'cultural left'] prefers not to talk about money. Its principal enemy is a mind-set rather than a set of economic arrangements.

It was an undeniable achievement of the new Left to institute (while reflecting upon the 'culturalist' experience and daily practices of their new underdefined habitat) new academic disciplines – like women's history, black, gay, Hispanic-American and other 'victim studies' (as Stefan

Collini generically described them); however, as Rorty caustically observes, the unemployed, homeless or trailer-parks studies are nowhere to be found. It has been left to 'scurrilous demagogues like Patrick Buchanan to take political advantage of the widening gap between rich and poor'.

In the soft and pliable, shapeless world of the global business and culture-industry elite, in which everything can be done and redone while nothing stays tough and solid for long, there is no room for obstinate and stiff realities like poverty, or for that matter for the indignity of being left behind and the humiliation attached to the inability to join in the consumer game. The new elite, with enough private cars not to worry about the sorry state of public transport, indeed drew up behind them the bridges which their parents crossed, but also forgot that such bridges were *socially* built and serviced – and that, had this not have been the case, then they themselves would hardly have landed where they are now.

For all practical intents and purposes, the new global elite have washed their hands of the 'public transport' issue. 'Redistribution' is definitely out, cast into the dust-bin of history among other regrettable errors of judgement which are now retrospectively charged with the oppression of individual autonomy and so with the tapering of that 'space' of which, as we are all fond of repeating, each of us 'needs more'. So out, as well, is community, understood as a site of equal shares in jointly attained welfare; as a kind of togetherness which presumes the responsibilities of the rich and gives substance to the hopes of the poor that such responsibilities will be taken up.

This is not to say that 'community' is absent from the global elite's vocabulary, or that it is, if spoken about, decried and censured. It is just that the 'community' of the global elite's *Lebenswelt* and that other 'community' of

the weak and deprived bear only a very limited resemblance to each other. In each of the two languages in which it appears, the language of the global elite and that of the left-behind, the notion of 'community' collates starkly different life experiences and stands for equally sharply contrasting aspirations.

However much they cherish their individual autonomy, and however confident they might be in their personal and private powers to defend it effectively and to make good use of it, the members of the global elite feel on occasion the need of belonging. Knowing that one is not alone and that one's own personal cravings are shared by others has a reassuring effect. People stumbling from one risky choice to another (we all live, after all, in the *Risikogesellschaft* and living in such a world is a *Risikoleben*), and never quite certain that the choice they make will bring the wholesome results they hope for, won't find a measure of reassurance comes amiss.

In our times, following the devaluation of local opinions and the slow yet relentless demise of 'local opinion leaders' (the issue I discussed more fully in the first two chapters of *Globalization: the Human Consequences*), two authorities and two authorities only are left that are able to endow with a reassuring power the judgements they pronounce or make manifest through their actions: the authority of experts, people 'who know better' (whose area of competence is too vast to be explored and tested by lay people), and the authority of numbers (on the assumption that the larger the numbers, the less likely they are to be wrong). The nature of the first authority makes the exterritorials of the *Risikogesellschaft* into a natural market for the 'counselling boom'. The nature of the second makes them dream of community and gives shape to the community of their dreams.

This community of dreams is an extrapolation of the

identity battles which fill their lives. It is a 'community' of the like-minded and the like-behaving; a community of *sameness* – which, when projected on a wide screen of widely replicated/copied conduct, seems to endow the chosen individual identity with the solid foundations the choosers would not otherwise trust it to possess. When monotonously reiterated by those around, the choices shed much of their idiosyncrasy and no longer appear random, dubious or risky: the security-inspiring solidity which they would badly miss if they stayed unique, they borrow from the imposing heaviness of the mass.

As we have seen before, however, people engaged in identity battles fear ultimate victory more than a string of defeats. The construction of identity is a neverending and forever incomplete process, and must remain such to deliver on its promise (or, more precisely, to keep the promise of delivery credible). In the life politics wrapped around the struggle for identity, self-creation and self-assertion are the main stakes, and freedom to choose is simultaneously the principal weapon and the most coveted prize. Ultimate victory would in one fell swoop remove the stake, decommission the weapon and cancel the prize. To avoid this eventuality, identity must stay *flexible* and always amenable to further experimentation and change; it must be a truly 'until further notice' kind of identity. The facility to dispose of an identity the moment it ceases to satisfy, or is deprived of its allure by competition from other and more seductive identities on offer, is far more vital than the 'realism' of the identity currently sought or momentarily appropriated and enjoyed.

The 'community' whose main uses are to confirm by the impressive power of numbers the propriety of the current choice, and to lend some of its gravity to the identity it stamps with 'social approval', must possess the same traits. It must be as easy to take apart as it has been

to put together. It must be and stay flexible, never being more than until further notice and 'as long as the satisfaction lasts'. Its creation and dismantling must be determined by the choices made by those who compose it – by their decisions to bestow or withdraw their allegiance. In no case should the allegiance, once declared, become irrevocable: the bond made by choices should not inconvenience, let alone preclude, further and different choices. The bond sought should not be binding on those who found it. To use Weber's famous metaphors, it is a light cloak, not a steel casing, that is sought.

Such requirements are met by the community of Kant's *Critique of Judgement: the Aesthetic Community*. Identity seems to share its existential status with beauty: like beauty, it has no other foundation to rest on but widely shared agreement, explicit or tacit, expressed in a consensual approval of judgement or in uniform conduct. Just as beauty boils down to artistic experience, the community in question is brought forth and consumed in the 'warm circle' of experience. Its 'objectivity' is woven entirely from the friable threads of subjective judgements, though the fact that they are woven together colours those judgements with a veneer of objectivity.

As long as it stays alive (that is, as long as it is being experienced), aesthetic community is shot through with a paradox: since it would betray or refute the freedom of its members were it to claim non-negotiable credentials, it has to keep its entrances and exits wide open. But were it to advertise the resulting lack of binding power, it would fail to perform the reassuring role which for the faithful was their prime motive in joining it. This is why, as the Czech novelist/philosopher Ivan Klima put it,[25] 'substitute faiths have a limited shelf-life', and 'the more bizarre the belief the more fanatical its adherents'. The less credible are the beliefs expressed by the choices (and so the less

likely it is that they will be widely shared, let alone adhered to firmly), the more passion will be needed to put together and to hold together the admittedly vulnerable union of the faithful; and passion being the sole cement holding the company of the faithful together, the 'shelf-life' of the 'community of judgement' is bound to be short. Passions are, after all, notorious for their incurable volatility and the way they shift. The need for aesthetic community, notably the variety of aesthetic community which services the construction/dismantling of identity, tends for those reasons to be as much self-perpetuating as it is self-defeating. That need is never to be gratified, and neither will it ever stop prompting the search for satisfaction.

The need for aesthetic community generated by identity concerns is the favourite grazing ground of the entertainment industry: the vastness of the need goes a long way towards explaining that industry's astonishing, and continuing success.

Thanks to the immense capacities of electronic technology, spectacles can be created which offer a chance of participation and a shared focus of attention to an indefinite multitude of physically remote spectators. Due to the very massiveness of the audience and the intensity of focused attention, the individual finds himself or herself fully and truly 'in the presence of a force which is superior to him and before which he bows'; the condition is thereby met which Émile Durkheim[26] set for the reassuring power of moral guidance designed and enforced by society. The guidance is these days aesthetically, rather than ethically, operated. Its principal vehicle is no longer the ethical authority of leaders with their visions, or moral preachers with their homilies, but the example of 'celebrities in view' (celebrities *because* of being in view); neither the sanctions attached nor their scattered yet rough power of enforcement is its principal weapon. Like all objects of aesthetic

experience, the guidance insinuated by the entertainment industry acts through seduction. There are no sanctions against those who fall out of the ranks and refuse to pay attention – apart from their own horror of missing an experience which others (so many others!) relish and enjoy.

The celebrities' authority is a derivative of the authority of numbers – it grows (and falls) together with the number of watchers, listeners, book-buyers or record-buyers. The increase and decrease in their seductive (and hence also reassuring) power are synchronized with the movements of the pendulums of TV ratings and tabloid readership; indeed, the attention paid by TV managers to ratings has a sociological justification deeper than they are aware of. Following the exploits of celebrities is not a matter of idle curiosity or appetite for amusement. The authority of numbers makes the 'individuals in public view' into authoritative examples: it endows their example with added gravity. Indeed, if many people do watch them closely, their example must be 'superior' to what a single spectator on his or her own may learn from his or her own life experience. No wonder that, as Klima quotes from J. G. Ballard's *A User's Guide to the Millennium* (1997),

> interviews crowd the airwaves, a confessional babble only too open to eavesdroppers. At almost any minute of the hour, politicians and film actors, novelists and media celebrities are being relentlessly questioned about their favourite topic, themselves. Many describe their unhappy childhoods, alcoholism and failed marriages with a frankness we would find embarrassing among our closest friends, let alone complete strangers.

What the avid watchers expect to find in the public confessions of the people in the limelight is the reassur-

ance that their own all-too-familiar loneliness is not just liveable, but given some skill and a modicum of luck may be put to good use. But what the spectators who eavesdrop on the celebrities' confessions are rewarded with in the first place is the much missed feeling of belonging: what they are promised day by day ('almost any minute of the hour') is a community of non-belonging, a togetherness of loners. Listening to the stories of unhappy childhoods, bouts of depression and broken marriages they are reassured that being alone means being in a big (and widely celebrated) company and that fighting it all alone is what makes them all into a community.

Klima says as well: people nowadays 'need idols to give them a sense of security, permanence and stability in a world that is increasingly insecure, dynamic and changeable'. Yes, they need idols – but to say that they need them for the 'sense of permanence and stability' is Klima's mistake. In a world notoriously 'dynamic and changeable', permanence and stability of the individual, blatantly unshared by those around, would be a recipe for disaster. Idols are needed for another purpose: to give assurance that *non-permanence* and *instability* are not unmitigated disasters, and may prove to be winning tickets in the lottery of happiness; one can make a sensible and enjoyable life among moving sands. Idols, therefore – such idols as are truly 'needed' – must convey (indeed, embody) the message that impermanence is here to stay while showing that instability is a place to cherish and enjoy. Courtesy of the hype industry, there is no shortage of such idols. Klima lists some of them:

> Footballers, ice-hockey players, tennis players, basketball players, guitarists, singers, film actors, television presenters and top models. Occasionally – and only symbolically – they are joined by some writer, painter, scholar, Nobel

> prizewinner (is there anyone who remembers their name a year later?), or princess – her tragic death recalling the ancient tradition of martyrs – until she too is forgotten.

We can see that the selection is by no means random and unmotivated. As Klima himself observes, 'there is nothing quite so transient as entertainment and physical beauty, and the idols that symbolize them are equally ephemeral.' This is, indeed, the crucial point. To serve the purpose, idols must be glittering enough to dazzle the spectators and be formidable enough to fill the stage from wings to wings; but they must be volatile and moveable as well – so they will quickly disappear into the wings of memory and leave the scene free for the crowd of would-be idols waiting their turn. There must be no time for lasting attachments to sediment between the idols and their fans, and particularly no single idol must get a lasting hold. The spectators stay enthralled for what, over the length of their lives, will seem no more than a fleeting moment. The graves of idols early deceased will make the life courses of the spectators like milestones, to be revisited and have flowers laid on them on anniversaries; but it will be up to the spectators, who have since moved on, to recall the deceased from oblivion for one more transient moment. Idols follow the pattern of 'maximal impact and instant obsolescence' which, according to George Steiner, is common to all the cultural inventions of the 'casino culture' of our times.

The idols accomplish a small miracle: they make the inconceivable happen; they conjure up the 'experience of community' without real community, the joy of belonging without the discomfort of being bound. The togetherness *feels real*, is *lived through* as real, yet it is not poisoned by that toughness, resilience and immunity to individual desires which Durkheim believed to be the attributes of

reality, but which the mobile residents of exterritoriality abhor and resent as an undue and unbearable invasion of their freedom. Idols, one may say, have been made to order to suit and serviced a life sliced into episodes. The communities which form around them are ready-made, instant communities for on-the-spot consumption – they are also fully disposable after use. These are communities which do not require a long history of slow and painstaking construction, do not need laborious effort to secure their future. For so long as they are being festively and joyfully consumed, idol-centred communities are difficult to distinguish from the 'real stuff' – but compared with the real thing they boast the advantage of being free from the off-putting 'stickiness' and obtrusiveness of the ordinary *Gemeinschaften* with their odious tendency to outlive their usefulness and welcome. The trick which the idol-focused aesthetic communities accomplish is to transform 'community' from a feared adversary of individual freedom of choice into a manifestation and (genuine or illusory) reconfirmation of individual autonomy.

Not all aesthetic communities are idol-centred, to be sure. The pivotal role of the 'celebrity in the limelight' can be played by other entities, notably a true or supposed, but panic-arousing, threat (for instance, by an intention to resettle asylum-seekers close to an established residential area, or by a rumour that supermarket shelves have been stacked with genetically engineered food with unknown consequences for consumers); or by a figure of a 'public enemy' (for instance, by a paedophile released from prison and now at large, or by obtrusive beggars or not-fit-to-be-looked-at homeless vagabonds sleeping rough in public places). Sometimes an aesthetic community may be formed around a one-off recurring festive event – like a pop festival, a football match or a fashionable, much talked about and crowd-pulling exhibition.

Other aesthetic communities are formed around 'problems' with which many individuals are struggling separately and on their own in their daily routine (for instance, weight-watching and inch-fighting); this kind of 'community' comes to life for the duration of the scheduled weekly or monthly ritual, and dissolves again, having reassured its members that tackling individual problems individually while using individual wits and skills is the right thing to do and a thing that all other individuals do with some success and never an ultimate defeat.

All such agents, events and interests providing a focus serve as 'pegs' on which worries and preoccupations which are individually experienced and individually coped with are temporarily hung by a great number of individuals – to be shortly taken off again and hung elsewhere: for that reason aesthetic communities can be described as 'peg communities'. Whatever their focal point, the common feature of aesthetic communities is the superficial and perfunctory, as well as transient, nature of the bonds emerging between their participants. The bonds are friable and short-lived. Since it is understood and has been agreed beforehand that they can be shaken off on demand, such bonds also cause little inconvenience and arouse little or no fear.

One thing which the aesthetic community emphatically does not do is to weave between its adherents a web of *ethical responsibilities*, and so of *long-term commitments*. Whatever bonds are established in the explosively brief life of the aesthetic community, they do not truly bind: they are, literally, 'bonds without consequences'. They tend to evaporate at the moment when human bonds truly matter – that is, at a time when they are needed to compensate for the individual's lack of resourcefulness or impotence. Like the attractions on offer in theme parks, the bonds of aesthetic communities are to be 'experi-

enced', and to be experienced on the spot – not taken home and consumed in the humdrum routine of day after day. They are, one may say, 'carnival bonds' and the communities which frame them are 'carnival communities'.

This is not, though, the stimulus which prompts the individuals *de jure* (that is, individuals 'by appointment' – told to resolve their problems by their own cunning for the simple reason that no one else will do it for them), who struggle in vain to become individuals *de facto* (that is, to become masters of their fate in deed, and not merely by public proclamation or self-delusion), to seek a kind of community which could, collectively, make good what they, individually, lack and miss. The community they seek would be an *ethical* community, in almost every respect the opposite of the 'aesthetic' variety. It would need to be woven from long-term commitments, from inalienable rights and unshakeable obligations, which thanks to their anticipated (and better still institutionally guaranteed) durability could be treated as known variables when the future is planned and projects designed. And the commitments which make the community ethical would be of the 'fraternal sharing' kind, reaffirming the right of every member to communal insurance against the errors and misadventures which are the risks inseparable from individual life. In short, what individuals *de jure* but blatantly not *de facto* are likely to read into the vision of community is a warrant of certainty, security and safety – the three qualities they miss most sorely in their life pursuits and which they cannot provide while they are going it alone and relying only on the scarce resources at their private disposal.

These two quite distinct models of community are all too often collapsed together and confused in the currently fashionable 'communitarian discourse'. Once they are col-

lapsed into each other, the salient contradictions that set them apart are misrepresented as philosophical problems and a quandary to be resolved by the refinement of philosophical reasoning – rather than depicted as the products of genuine social conflicts that they really are.