

THE ANARCHIST CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY  
IN THE THOUGHT OF BATAILLE, BLANCHOT AND NANCY

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with the concept of community in the thought of three French postmodern philosophers—Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy. I contend that anarchism is the best framework for understanding them because they emphasize the importance of community outside of the organization of the state. On their view, community as a unity or totality of social relations is absent in contemporary life, but this is as it should be because it makes possible the emergence of communities that are not premised on unity or totality but difference and openness. Bataille thinks that community requires an experience of sovereignty that is sacred rather than political, and that it is available through myth. Blanchot considers community in terms of the inherent neutrality of relations which cannot be co-opted by political interests. Nancy has an ontological orientation to politics that interprets existence as a community and results in a global law of multiple networks. All three stress the interplay between freedom and order, and seek a heightened sense of responsibility in community. Yet they do not acknowledge that community requires lasting institutions, and despite their attack on totalitarianism, they do not advocate democracy. Their work powerfully questions the concept of community, but it ultimately fails to offer viable alternatives for contemporary political philosophy.

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I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Diane Kiefe (1943-1991) and Harry Kiefe (1942-1997), who taught me that the Dutch word ‘*gesellig*’ is untranslatable—they were right.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Georges Bataille	AM	<i>The Absence of Myth</i>
	G	<i>Guilty</i>
	IN	<i>Inner Experience</i>
	N	<i>On Nietzsche</i>
	LRC	“Letter to René Char”
	S	<i>Sovereignty</i>
	SS	“Sacred Sociology”
	VE	<i>Visions of Excess</i>
Maurice Blanchot	BR	<i>The Blanchot Reader</i>
	CC	“Our Clandestine Companion”
	F	<i>Friendship</i>
	IC	<i>The Infinite Conversation</i>
	SNB	<i>The Step Not Beyond</i>
	UC	<i>The Unavowable Community</i>
	WD	<i>The Writing of the Disaster</i>
	WF	<i>The Work of Fire</i>
Jean-Luc Nancy	BC	“Of Being-in-Common”
	BSP	<i>Being Singular Plural</i>
	C	“The Compearance”
	EF	<i>The Experience of Freedom</i>
	IC	<i>The Inoperative Community</i>
	RP	<i>Retreating the Political</i>
	SV	“Sharing Voices”
	SW	<i>The Sense of the World</i>

## INTRODUCTION

### THE QUESTION CONCERNING COMMUNITY

It may be that these questions are not *philosophical*, are not *philosophy's* questions. Nevertheless, these should be the only questions today capable of founding the community, within the world, of those who are still called philosophers. . . . A community of the question, therefore, within that fragile moment when the question is not yet determined enough for the hypocrisy of an answer to have already initiated itself beneath the mask of the question, and not yet determined enough for its voice to have been already and fraudulently articulated within the very syntax of the question. A community of decision, of initiative, of absolute initiality, but also a threatened community, in which the question has not yet found the language it has decided to seek, is not yet sure of its own possibility within the community. A community of the question about the possibility of the question.

— Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics”

#### 1.0. The Ubiquity of the Concept of Community

The concept of community is ubiquitous. The term is used increasingly in television talk-shows and radio programs, newspaper columns and magazine articles, government press releases and industry mission statements, bestsellers and university texts. Previously community was a social relation often identified by a set of accepted characteristics, but there is such a variety of things called community and such a multiplication of meanings of community that now we hardly know what it is or what it means. Our ordinary uses of the term apply to everything from neighborhoods to nations. It designates settlements defined by geographical location and temporal contiguity. It refers to groups whose members share an activity or interest, such as a scientific community, or a common characteristic, such as



an ethnic community. Religious people have a community of faith, which includes their congregation and those who have shared and will share the same beliefs. Social workers speak of community development, by which they mean everything from improving living conditions to facilitating decision-making processes. We can now include the virtual communities that subsist electronically on the Internet. These various uses indicate that ‘community’ concerns not only people and places but attachment to ideas, ideals and interests.

The concept of community has increasing academic currency in recent years. While empirical research into the features and functions of community has been a staple of the human sciences since their inception, the concept of community has become more important to the traditions of political philosophy lately, though it is as old as Western thought itself. The debate between liberals and communitarians concerns the personal and political significance of community in the constitution of individual identity and the creation of systems of justice. Critical theorists appeal to the community of interlocutors as a basis for reaching consensus in philosophy and politics. Those philosophers called ‘postmodern’ invoke community in a way that undermines its normal meaning and reinvests it with new ones.

‘Community’ is one of Raymond Williams’ keywords, which are “binding words in certain activities and their interpretation . . . indicative words in certain forms of thought.”<sup>1</sup> Keywords obligate us to speak in certain ways in certain circumstances and possess an

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<sup>1</sup>Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co., 1988), 15; cited hereafter as K.

exemplifying or explanatory power by standing for primitive elements in any discussion, but they are not necessarily stable terms because their meanings are changeable, and above all contested, at times signaling a break between two meanings of the same word (K, 23). The term 'community' was in use in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but since the 17<sup>th</sup> century it has designated localized relationships which are smaller than society, though the term 'society' was itself used until the 18<sup>th</sup> century to distinguish direct relationships from the formal organization of the state (K, 75). The distinction between the sentimentality and immediacy of community and the abstractness and instrumentality of state or civil society was formalized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with Ferdinand Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft* dichotomy (K, 76). The notable characteristic of 'community' is its positive persuasive force.

Community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (*state, nation, society*, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term. (K, 76)

Perhaps emphasizing Williams' view that keywords involve clusters of associations, Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders refer to 'amoeba words' which extend beyond the conditions or contexts where they first emerged and proliferate in other environments. "Amoeba words are often strong and difficult and persuasive in everyday language, and serve to indicate wider areas of experience."<sup>2</sup> They spill out over their original linguistic boundaries and spread into other areas of language, changing their characteristics and the other areas. For example, the word 'energy' exemplifies the plasticity of an amoeba word: its original

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<sup>2</sup>Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders, *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind* (New York: Random House, 1988), 107; cited hereafter as ABC.

meaning refers to the vigor or impressive quality of an expression, usually in the context of rhetoric or music, but its technical redefinition in the nineteenth century economics refers to the force of the body applied to work, and its current use in physics refers to an abstraction of power (ABC, 106).

It is not entirely clear exactly what kind of word ‘community’ is, since it is both rigid and plastic, parochial and universal. It has the effectiveness of a keyword, especially in the reflections of philosophers and the rhetoric of politicians, but its ability to adapt to many discussions and to proliferate disparate associations also suggests that it is an amoeba word. Certainly changes are occurring to ‘community’ in recent times, and it is nowhere more obvious than in the three thinkers under discussion in this thesis, where the tension between the accepted or traditional meaning of the word and the sometimes strange and mysterious associations is highest. The persuasive force of their work relies on the distinction of the negativity of existing relations from the positivity of alternative relations, though they insist on negative rather than positive meanings of community. On the one hand, they promote anarchistic concepts of community in criticizing the reduction of human relations to the state and civil society. On the other hand, their anarchistic concepts of communities are negative in virtue of the fact that they are not meant have positive value in philosophy and politics.

### **1.1. The Concept of Community in Question**

This thesis is not a report of empirical research into the life of concrete communities but a philosophical analysis of the concept of community. The thematic work is sketched against the background of questions about community that guide this thesis, though they may

is increasingly important, even imperative, for philosophers to consider community or have a concept of community? What is at stake in this interest? There is a general feeling, though not all people share it or express similarly, that something vital about social relations has been lost or it has not been achieved. Interest in the concept of community is a response to that lost or unachieved goal. Community is supposed to be desirable, but what it is and how it satisfies our desires remains at the center of controversy.

There are questions about the nature of the subject under study. What is community? How is it different from other organized relationships? Is there a specific property that a group must have to be considered a community? These questions concern the basic characteristics of community and the factors that hold them together or tear them apart. The sociological tradition has been important in this context, especially in the analysis of the change from stronger to weaker forms of social life, from traditional to legal relations, in the modern period.

What then is the relation between individuality and community? Is one's identity formed through relations with others? If so, how deep does the social constitution of the self go? We often refer to 'membership' when the focus is on elective societies, and 'citizenship' when the focus is on nations or states. Yet these relationships assume that individuals willingly enter into them or at least can choose to stay or leave them if they are born or brought into them. If community is distinct from these looser relations, then it requires a more robust notion of one's identification with others.

Is community a stable basis for justice, or is community an ideological burden on justice? To many, commitment to a community helps to achieve justice. This is challenged

by those who wonder whether there are ways in which communal values hinder justice. In other words, the tension between the inclusive and exclusive quality of community may affect the achievement of justice. Furthermore, there is no necessary link between community and justice—diverse systems of justice exist under a similar concept of community, and a shared sense of justice may be secured by various concepts of community.

One of the questions that arises in comparing various concepts of community is whether or not there something common to all concepts of community, or whether they are different despite some similarities. Are the various concepts of community coherent? While we could define the essence of community, with the assumption that there is such a thing, we could also determine whether there must be anything essential to community, under the suspicion is that there is not and need not be.

Another question reflects on the difference between the concept and the thing that is conceptualized. Is there a referent for the concept of community? Does the concept of community as a deep-rooted solidarity, not only of land or blood but feeling and function, correspond to anything that exists, did exist or could exist? If ‘community’ implies a strong sense of identity, perhaps not. The concept of community refers to the commonality of characteristics, commitments or territory, but we may wonder if anything of this sort is found in the world because there is always difference, dissent and dispersion. It could be that discussions of this topic have convinced us that its subject matter is real when it is just the result of such discussions.

If the concept of community is a product of discussions about social relations, a convenient tool for philosophical analysis or political interests, how does this nominal status

effect its function? Does the concept of community express something true about human relations, or simply speak of our desire for the truth about human relations? The question now is whether the concept of community is a foundation or fiction of unity and totality in social life. It haunts the other questions of why there is interest in community, what is community, how it is involved with issues of identity and justice, and whether the concept of community has coherence and a reference. Once the concept of community is in question, can it perform the theoretical and practical tasks set for it?

## **1.2. The Thought of Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy**

The increasing use of the concept of community motivates my investigation into its role in the traditions of political philosophy. This task cannot be completed in a doctoral thesis, so I focus on one tradition and a few figures in it: the French postmodern philosophers Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy. There is not yet a sustained study on the various concepts of community in this tradition. Also, it is in their work that the concept of community is found in acute conditions of change and contestation, and attending to them may reveal some important insights into the nature of community in general. Furthermore, given the reputation of these thinkers for being politically suspect and philosophically spurious, I am especially curious to determine whether or not they make legitimate contributions to political philosophy.

The choice of Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy is not arbitrary. Historical and intellectual confluences have woven their work together, and their interweaving produces a cloth that is easier to grasp whole than by each separate piece; no one strand extends through

the entire length, though tugging on one strand often tightens the others around it. These philosophers think that the concept of community, as a unity of social relations, is absent in contemporary life, but they also attempt to outline various social relations that exist despite or due to such an absence. A discussion of the concept of community in contemporary French philosophy must consider Bataille, and his influence is felt strongly in the thought of Blanchot and Nancy, who equally comment on his work and react to each others' work. Bataille argues that the alleged absence of community is a nostalgic myth which convinces us that something about social relations has been lost and distracts us from creating new communities now. Similarly, Blanchot and Nancy both recognize the unavowability or inoperativeness of community, which means community can neither be represented and represent people living together, nor be mobilized to organize action towards a common goal. Yet they propose that once the social space is cleared of these previous ideologies people can create better relationships with each other. To them, the kind of relation brought by community does not yet exist, but it is unclear whether they encourage us to strive to create it or wait for it to arrive in a hitherto unrecognized form.

Chapter 2 argues that anarchism is the framework in which Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy can best be understood. There are problems with anarchism, but it expresses the spirit of their political philosophy, for better or for worse. In this thesis anarchism is defined as the belief that individuality and community are only fully developed outside the organization of the state, and a distinction is made between partial and complete anarchy according to the degree that this stateless condition is sought as a withdrawal from, opposition to or absolute absence of the state. While my argument for the significance of anarchism first refers to

recent interpretations of classical anarchism as communal individuality and a non-coercive social order, the more proximate points of reference for the thinkers under study are Levinas's definition of anarchy as an inescapable absence of order prior to positive principles, issuing in an anti-essentialist ethics which leads from social law to universal justice, and Derrida's idea that anarchy is an ever present aspect of the creation and conservation of law and the undecidability of judgements. Understood in these ways, there is less to fear from an appeal to anarchism. After framing anarchism in the best light, certain central features of Bataille's, Blanchot's and Nancy's work can come to the forefront. Their strengths and weaknesses are also those of anarchism.

Bataille (Chapter 3) begins with the belief in the communal character of humanity, but states that there is no communitarian essence of humanity because community is not the completion of isolated individuals. He considers the sacred, something outside the limits of individuals, experienced and expressed through myths, the privileged locus of community. Though he claims that the myths and communities centered on the sacred are absent in contemporary life, he concludes that the belief that myth and community are absent is our peculiarly contemporary myth and community, and demonstrates the effects of the sacred in industrial society. He distinguishes between traditional communities where belonging is based on the facts of human life, such as where we are born, and elective communities where belonging is based on the choices of its members. The problem with his anarchistic approach of forgoing long-standing institutions in favour of effervescent forms of belonging is that it is impossible to sustain effervescent belonging based on choice without the support of some sort of institutions. Stressing the heterological elements outside of political utility and unity,



he opposes the sovereignty of the sacred to the sovereignty of states. His anarchism does not give grounds for judging among various political options because he rejects them all, and when he does accept a form of government, he is easily tempted into dramatic and ritualistic forms, such as fascism, and away from banal but stable forms, such as democracy.

Blanchot (Chapter 4) takes the absence of community further to say that community is unavowable insofar as we cannot even understand what community is, so that the understanding of community either mistakes its subject matter or destroys it altogether. He provides three examples—the public relation of the people, the private relation of the couple, and the mixed form of friendship—to show how community is never incorporated into the interests of the state and civil society. To him, anarchism means that community should not last at all, but develop and disperse spontaneously. His anarchistic claims are a function of his focus on neutrality, understood as an existential excess for which we cannot account conceptually. It recommends the two possibilities of refusing to participate in politics and passive responsibility as an absolute obligation to the particular other which befalls us before we can consciously choose general obligations in the state or civil society. This anarchistic characterization raises serious issues about our ability to know and act towards others.

Nancy (Chapter 5) also appeals to Bataille's absence of community and picks up Blanchot's term *désœuvrement* for his notion of the inoperative community, in order to emphasize the fact that community is not an immanent unity that is the work of individuals and governments, or if it is, it is likely to be totalitarian. To counteract political appropriations of the concept of community, he has an ontological orientation that emphasizes the inherent relationality of life. In other words, existence is as community,

though this is never represented by actual communities. This makes his thought anarchistic. It is an aspect of his Heideggerian-inspired 'retreating of the political' that withdraws politics from closing the question of community, and redefines politics according to the essence of community. To him, anarchism emerges when the sovereignty of states dissolves under the law of the world, the movement from local justice to global justice, though this is a matter of proliferation rather than unification. His position raises the question as to whether or not an ontological politics is desirable, because if existence is as community, then there may be no normative basis for criticizing totalitarian communities or encouraging democratic communities.

After analyzing the anarchistic character of the concept of community in the thought of Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy, drawing attention to the problems it poses in their work, I conclude (Chapter 6) that anarchism is defensible when it proposes partial rather than complete anarchy. I argue that anarchy is seen in those democracies which have a strong but regulated struggle for power and an appreciation for the indeterminacy of social life. However, anarchism also leads into the dangers of radical freedom and statelessness in which we are divorced from any concrete community that could guarantee our civil liberties. It seeks a stronger sense of freedom and moral responsibility in community, but it fails to defend democratic ideals and define community as a relation supported by lasting institutions. On the whole, Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy are proponents of partial rather than complete anarchy, but problems emerge in their work when they pass from the former to the latter.

### **1.3. The Contributions and Problems of Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy**

The contributions to political philosophy by Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy can be considered by characterizing their answers to the questions that guide this thesis. They are what we would expect from anarchists. To them, it is imperative that we consider the concept of community because it too easily succumbs to the desire for unity and totality, not only the empirical examples of communities during the inter-war period, but the ways in which we think about community today. They offer alternatives to the individualist or contractual model of community and the collectivist or organic model of community. Community is not based on a property possessed in common, but the fact of existence together before any imposed commonality. They say that community constitutes the self, because community is the way in which everything exists, but this does not mean that community is the essence of the self. Individuals are inherently social, though this is realized only outside organized social life. They argue that community can overcome obstacles to achieving justice, including those it erects, by being as spontaneous as possible. The reduction of community to particular political interests in the state or civil society is especially restrictive to them. They intimate that community exists, but insist it is not identifiable with actual communities that exist. Their message is that the essence of community cannot be expressed by any concrete community; the implications of this need to be specified further.

Perhaps the most important contributions Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy make to political philosophy rest with the questions they raise rather than the answers they provide. Though the concept of community is expected to do hard work for political philosophers, they supply useful criticisms about the suitability of the concept of community. They

participate in the postmodern critique of representation because they challenge the attempt to represent reality in thought and the assumption that there is a reality to represent in thought. While they wonder whether we can make general claims about community, despite such caution, they do make general claims about community. They question the meaning of the concept of community, but they leave unchallenged the importance of the concept of community for political philosophy. The value of their work is to illuminate the difficulties faced by any analysis of community, even when they are a prime example of these difficulties. They can increase our sensitivity to the spurious uses of the concept of community in other traditions of political philosophy, but they are not free from problems either.

There are serious shortcomings with Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy's concepts of community. While the title 'anarchist' highlights their advocation of freedom within social order and a stronger sense of responsibility that they think is only available outside the state and civil society, it also reveals problems with their concepts of community that should lead us to the question of whether or not their alternatives are acceptable. For the most part, these problems emerge when they move from partial to complete anarchy. Firstly, despite their attacks on totalitarianism, they offer only weak defenses of democracy or democratic ideals. Secondly, their concepts of community are incomplete because they show no interest in communities that last. Thirdly, they do not define the essence of community that is supposedly other than or irreducible to concrete communities. The first problem can be solved by showing how their thought is consistent with democracy, though they do not take this option. The second problem cannot be corrected except by challenging the particular

approach of their projects. The third problem demands a philosophical shift and may mean abandoning the postmodern perspective.

The first problem is specifically political. Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy criticize totalitarianism, but they cannot accept democracy wholeheartedly. This problem may be contingent on historical circumstances: the European experience of the rise of totalitarianism and the weakening of democracy before and during World War II. They were shaken by the allegedly elected government that repressed rights in Germany, then witnessed the weakness of the League of Nations in not stopping the advancing armies, and lamented that the Vichy Regime in France capitulated and collaborated with the occupiers. However, their view of the failure of democracy in the face of totalitarianism is dubious due to the fact that democracy did defeat totalitarianism, and their claim that totalitarianism is made possible by democracy is a contestable attribution of cause and effect. It is helpful to counsel vigilance for 'softer' forms of totalitarianism in democracy, but to identify one with the other is questionable. Nonetheless, their anarchism could be made consistent with democratic ideals without losing the gist of their work. One advantage of the anarchistic concept of community is that it can be considered an aspect of radical democracy. There is anarchy in the order afforded by democracy, though this requires us to forego effervescence and support the institutions that protect democratic ideals. It is assumed that democracy is the best form of government, and these thinkers are unsatisfactory to the extent that they do not give good grounds for accepting it.

The second problem is related to the first. Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy cannot conceive of community in terms of lasting institutions. This is another aspect of anarchism.

They deny that community should endure at all. This is not an inadvertent failure of social relations but the intentional feature of them. They give voice to the feeling that community is irreducible to the state and civil society, though they silently pass over the alternatives, leaving the impression that there are none. To demand the destruction of order for freedom leads to radical freedom divorced from concrete contexts rather than civil liberties established in a space of public appearance. They ignore the danger of statelessness that does not avoid but invites totalitarianism because there is no state institutions to protect the people. These problem may be remedied by emphasizing partial rather than complete anarchy.

Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy's interest in the liminal moments when communities are either being born or in death throws results in some significant insights about the nature of community. Yet their concepts of community are incomplete because they neglect what happens between the birth and death of communities. The life-cycle on either side of these borders is not important to them. We are meant to remain in limbo outside of any organized social relations. Their analysis suffers from neglecting the things that members of communities do to sustain themselves and their institutions or denigrating them as unimportant and illegitimate features of community.

The third problem is systematic, central to the postmodernist reaction to the tradition of philosophy. Whitehead defines metaphysics as "the endeavor to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be

interpreted.”<sup>3</sup> Though characterizations of metaphysics are contestable, basic to every view is the distinction between general laws and particular instances, and the requirement that first principles not fail of empirical exemplification (PR, 4). In other words, the essential is always instantiated by the accidental, and the accidental is used to explain the essential. The task of metaphysics is to understand the ultimate that is actualized: “In all philosophic theory there is an ultimate which is actual in virtue of its accidents. It is only then capable of characterization through its accidental embodiments, and apart from these accidents is devoid of actuality” (PR, 7).

Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy are postmodernists due to their denial of the distinction between the essential and the accidental. Their thought trades on the distinction, here rendered as the difference between the essence of community and concrete communities, though they question the assumption underlying it. This poses the problem of determining what the term ‘community’ refers to in their work. On one reading, they take community to mean the ultimate reality of social relations outside the instances of social relations. They criticize concrete communities as inauthentic, suggesting that they think there is an authentic community other than our everyday ideas of community. On another reading, they try to account for the instances without an ultimate reality. This accords with their anti-essentialism. Does the concept of community in the thought of Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy refers to an active cause of social relations, or is it is a name for nothing. Is community something inexhaustible and non-determinate or empty and indeterminate? This ambiguity

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<sup>3</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York, Free Press, 1978), 3; cited hereafter as PR.

makes their work hard to understand. The clearest characterization of their thought is this: community is an ultimate reality, not because it always already exists outside its instances, but because it is never achieved by any or all of its instances.

The questions Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy raise are whether it is possible to conceptualize community, since it is uncertain that there is an essence of community other than concrete communities, and whether it is desirable to conceptualize community, when attempts to do so tend towards essentialism. The extent to which their work asks and answers these questions is the critical test of their concepts of community and their contributions to political philosophy. Yet their anarchistic approach to the concept of community means that it is difficult to determine whether they are successful because they undermine the stable basis for judgement. They resist our desire for a final definition.



## CHAPTER 2

### TOWARDS AN ANARCHISTIC CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY

*The novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-state (humanity). . . . In the final instance the State can recognize any claim for identity—even that of a State identity within the State (the recent history of relations between the state and terrorism is an eloquent confirmation of this fact). What the State cannot tolerate in any way, however, is that singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging.*

—Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*

#### 2.0. An Argument for Anarchism

Before discussing the concepts of community in the thought of Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy, I will construct the context in which to understand their work and consider their contribution to political philosophy. While they display some similarities with the liberals and communitarians who have dominated recent Anglo-American political philosophy, they fit neither framework well, because they neither adopt the individualist standpoint nor accept that the social character of humans is the essence of humanity. Instead, my contention is that anarchism is a much more revealing framework for assessing these three thinkers.

I begin by outlining a short history of the idea of sovereignty, considered as the interrelation of freedom and order and the moral authority of law, as a basis for understanding the anarchist rejection of the state and its laws. Then, rather than provide a

point-by-point comparison of Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy to thinkers like Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin, for example, I give attention to two types of contemporary anarchism. The first is the ‘classical’ form represented by Alan Ritter, Michael Taylor and George Crowder, who offer a defense of anarchism in terms of the relation of freedom and order in community without the state. To them, ideas like communal individuality and moral self-direction are important. This is followed by consideration of two ‘postmodern’ philosophers, Levinas and Derrida, who define anarchism as an ethical relation that is anterior and anachronistic to legal relations—being before the law, so to speak. They think that anarchy is the priority of absolute responsibility to a particular other outside of generalized obligations to others in the state and civil society.

With the construction of this context we will be able to characterize Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy as anarchists. They do not call themselves anarchists, but there is an anarchist quality to their thought, whether they emphasize elements that exceed or escape political utility and social stability, counsel insubordination and a refusal of political representation, or seek to dissolve state sovereignty in view of the law of the world. They question the justice of existing institutions, and demand the dismantling of the state altogether or force us to radically rethink the state in the contemporary period. To them, the anarchistic alternative to the state is the absent, unavowable and inoperative community. Their views are anarchistic to the extent that they think that members of a community should not represent themselves as a community or work towards a complete community.

Defining the thought of Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy as anarchist has the double advantage of identifying the positive aspects of their work and pointing to the problems

associated with it. One of the most significant contributions of the anarchist tradition, which is continued by these three thinkers, is the idea that universal justice cannot be administered by any government but can best be achieved by collectives of individuals free from government intervention. Yet its success as a tool or tactic against injustice suggests the presence of some sort of enduring institution, which they deny. In this respect, the problems with these three thinkers are their passage from partial anarchy to pure anarchy, demonstrated by their denial of democracy which could accommodate aspects of anarchism, and their failure to recognize the relation between concrete freedoms and communities that protect them, made evident by their neglect of the dangerous effects of statelessness. These problems are largely due to the weakness of their anarchistic concepts of community.

It adds insult to injury to associate anarchism with postmodernism. After all, anarchism has a poor reputation—rightly or wrongly—as a theory and a practice. Some may say that it is bad enough that postmodernism criticizes representation and is involved in self-contradictory denials of truth, but to identify it with anarchism is to add to its ethical and political bankruptcy as well. Both as a philosophy and a politics, anarchism is suspect. Historically, it is associated with terrorism. Theoretically, many think that it collapses in self-contradiction, since it cannot have a lack of rule as a rule. Practically, it cannot maintain its own organization long enough to achieve its aims. We must remain mindful of these problems, because they raise many important issues for anarchism (though they do not only apply to anarchism), but none of them automatically argues against anarchism outright.

Returning anarchism to the political landscape, at least as a tool of analysis, is not without value for understanding various movements in contemporary society. There is an

increase in anarchistic activity in modern democracies. Demonstrations during the meetings of the World Trade Organization provide evidence of anarchistic attempts to give voice to those who want to raise concerns that are not recognized by governments and ruling orders that are deemed to be democratic. I do not defend the indiscriminate destruction that can accompany anarchist activity, but there are times when we must act outside of sanctioned social organizations to serve justice.

### **2.1. A Short History of Sovereignty**

The idea of sovereignty is closely associated with the concept of community. In fact, debate about the relation of freedom and order is central to anarchist concepts of community. Sovereignty is primarily a legal concept, referring particularly to the legislative or law-giving body rather than executive or law-enforcing body, and defining government as the legitimate right to make laws for an individual or a community. Throughout its history, sovereignty becomes increasingly associated with autonomy or self-rule, whether it is the political autonomy of states to govern themselves without interference from the church and other states, or the moral autonomy of individuals to govern themselves. Anarchists are perhaps the extreme example of this tradition. While anarchists reject the sovereignty of states and governmental law, they nonetheless support the sovereignty of alternative communities and alternative views of law. For these reasons, it is important to outline a short history of the idea of sovereignty in order to understand the significance of anarchism in general and the anarchism of Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy in particular.

In the medieval period the concept of sovereignty comes from the relation between

Church and State.<sup>1</sup> While Augustine (354-430) and Aquinas (1224-1274) both think that sovereignty is ecclesiastical because the origin and right of law rests with God and priestly representatives, Augustine considers the State a necessary evil to counteract the greater evil of original sin, though the Church is still the best corrective (HP, 2:89), and Aquinas claims that the State is an inevitable outcome of the essential sociability of humans, whose sinful nature means that it is an imperfect reflection of communion of saints (HP, 2:415). By the late medieval period, the rise of and resistance to absolutism brought the separation of Church and State and the idea of natural freedom. William of Ockham (1290-1349) distinguishes ecclesiastical and secular sovereignty, and though he insists that the Church is more important than the State, he feels that the former has no role to play in the affairs of the latter (HP, 3:117). Marsilius of Padua (1300-1343) supports the separation and the supremacy of the State over the Church; politics exists for the sake of the good life, but the priestly order is only one aspect of achieving that goal within political life (HP, 3:173). Furthermore, for both of them, natural law no longer has the religious cast, but either signifies the freedom of persons that possess the right to choose their rulers, or is defined by what is universally recognized and practiced by all nations (HP, 3:174). The result of these views is that the citizenry are considered the primary legislators and moral source of law; the idea of the inviolable sovereignty of the people explicitly emerges.

The Renaissance continues the idea of secular sovereignty. Jean Bodin (1530-1596) defines sovereignty as the distinctive feature of the State, and distinguishes forms of secular

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<sup>1</sup>Fredrick Copelston, *A History of Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1985), vol 2:87; cited hereafter as HP.

sovereignty in order to determine what sovereignty is in itself. Sovereignty, understood as a power to unify people under an absolute authority, is necessary for the existence of the State (HP, 3:325). It matters little whether supreme rule rests with monarchs, aristocracies or citizens as a whole; the important point is that sovereignty entails the right to make law, which is not itself subject to the power charged with enforcement of law (HP, 3:326).

Another aspect of the Renaissance is the view that the State is a natural institution. Suarez (1548-1617) think that the State is not an artificial arrangement, but emerges from the human need for community, though it requires an authority with the right to make laws and the power to enforce them (HP, 3:392). He distinguishes rule or law from right or justice, claiming that the obligatory force of the legislator rests on justice as it is envisioned by a community of freely rational humans and exercised for the common good of their perfection; sovereignty should seek to attain the unity of humanity (HP, 3:381). Althusius (1557-1638) considers the State as a community, like families, corporations and provinces, that exists as a contract between its members to pursue a common interest, though the State is distinguished by a second contract between these other communities and an authority that protects the purposes of the people (HP, 3: 327). To Grotius (1583-1645), social life is also a natural condition sustained through the rule of law. The State is based on natural law and the rational autonomy of humanity (HP, 3:332).

In modern philosophy the concept of sovereignty is affected by a growing spirit of materialism and individualism. Hobbes (1588-1679) and Spinoza (1632-1677) both hypothesize a state of nature wherein we have rights that are unlimited in principle though limited by our powers. They then conceive a social contact based on the belief that it is in

our own interest to escape the state of nature by transferring our rights and powers to a sovereign in exchange for the peace and protection of society (HP, 5:38). Once people become subjects by transferring their rights and powers to the sovereign, they obey the laws because they have the peace and protection they exchanged for freedom. Hobbes thinks that sovereignty takes many forms, but the best is monarchy, because it affords the most authority in a one person with the least division and disruption of power, while democracy is the worst, because it allows dissension in public opinion and elections suspend and constantly change power. He nonetheless conflates the legislative and executive bodies of the sovereign, locating the right to rule in the power to rule (HP, 5:41). Spinoza thinks that democracy is the best form of sovereignty because it is most in accordance with nature by allowing the greatest freedom, but even in democracy the people are sovereign because they have the power to enforce their rule. He also shows the materialism of the age when he suggests that the power of the sovereign's executive body to enforce the laws does not rest with the moral authority of the legislative body, but the moral authority of the legislative body results from the power of the sovereign's executive body to enforce the laws (HP, 4:256).

Locke (1632-1704) also has a hypothesis of the state of nature wherein human beings are naturally free, and supports a social contract by which people try to secure the pursuit of their individual interests. However, for him, natural liberty is never a licence to do as we wish, because our reason discovers the moral law which conscience is bound to obey it. He distinguishes moral law over and above the civil law of the State (HP, 5:128). Locke thinks that human beings have a natural right of freedom and a natural duty to moral law by respecting the freedom of others, but the social contract also arises naturally to ensure what

human nature alone cannot. It is important to note that the social contract does not arise out of enlightened egoism, but out of the need to guarantee obedience to the moral law. It is not based on an ideal of human nature, but is a means to the end of ensuring that our rights are protected and our duties fulfilled (HP, 5:131).

Rousseau (1712-1778) also supposes a hypothetical state of nature prior to society, but he believes that it is a condition of harmony among primitive people, and that the artificial and civilizing forces of society cause conflict and a general weakening of human character (HP, 6:62). Contrary to those who think that society helps humanity achieve the good life, he says that society is inimical to the perfection of humanity. He argues that the legal institution is detrimental because it protects the right to private property, which is a mistaken supposition about human nature anyway, and leads to conflicts over that right (HP, 6:68). He later develops a more positive conception of the social contract that involves an idea of general will. He thinks that the origin of society is a contract in which members agree to exchange their natural liberty for the general will which guarantees their civil and moral liberties (HP, 6:83). If the general will guides members of society, then it cannot be objected that laws deny freedom since they are precisely what we would want for ourselves. Rousseau differs from Hobbes and Spinoza, who conflate the legislative and executive powers of the sovereign, and is similar to Locke in clearly identifying sovereignty as a legal concept when he distinguishes between sovereignty and government, by which he means the difference between the legislative body and executive body of the ruling power (HP, 6:72). He strongly supports popular sovereignty and the notion that each person is the sovereign who gives the law and the subject who abides by it. By agreeing to live by the laws of the



body politic expressed in the general will, the people are not slaves but become masters of themselves, since the law comes not from elsewhere but from their moral conscience. The obedience to law is true liberty (HP, 6:85).

The ideas of freedom and moral law are central to the Enlightenment. With Kant (1774-1804) the concept of sovereignty becomes an ethical rather than a political issue; it belongs to the rational individual who understands and obeys moral laws, and this raises the moral and rational individual above all political powers. He proposes a priori moral laws opposed to the natural inclinations of human beings or the sanctions of society (HP, 6:313). According to him, the only good thing is a good will, and the morality of an act is determined by the will to obey the moral law rather than the intended or eventual consequences of an action (HP, 6:318). The rational will of the individual is the sole arbiter of moral law. This is not suggesting that reason discovers the moral law which lies outside of it, but that the rational will is the very origin of moral law. The autonomy of the individual is the supreme principle of morality. In other words freedom is its own legislator; the individual is sovereign (HP, 6:329). Kant puts sovereignty squarely in the moral realm, his theory is not without political implications, as is clear in his notion of the unity of humanity under a common moral law called the kingdom of ends, wherein members respect each other as ends in themselves or as autonomous beings not subject to external constraints (HP, 6:331). Like Rousseau, he claims that the rational individual in the kingdom of ends is both the sovereign who gives law and the subject who obeys law. The body politic that legislates for itself is a common will. The laws given by the common will are obligatory because they are an expression of our own will writ large, while the will of all is not obligatory because

it would involve placing our own wills under the influence of others and alienating our autonomy.

Hegel (1770-1831) also starts with the individual will insofar as it is conscious of and acts in accordance with its autonomy (HP, 7:203). Rights arise when an individual will expresses itself the external world of material things, investing nature with purpose and turning it into property. A contract is a unity wills that implies mutual recognition of the rights of propertied persons (HP, 7:206). Yet abstract rights are given concrete content as duties and virtues according to the natural character and social position of individuals. Thus the good is specified in a universal system of ethical life (HP, 7:209). Hegel thinks that the free will is a moral will, and as such, it is sovereign. However, he avoids a individualistic interpretation of sovereignty by considering it in relation to the family, civil society and the State. The individual will moves from subjective freedom to objective freedom by understanding that freedom is universally shared. While the family is a unity of wills in an intimate totality, and civil society is a conflict of individual interests that disrupts that totality, the State is a synthesis of totality and individual interests, an organic unity of individuals rather than an abstraction over and above them (HP, 7:212). Just as the individual will is a subjective sovereign over itself, the State is an objective sovereign over its subjects. Sovereignty in the political realm is also the self-legislation of the body politic. Strictly speaking, there is not just a parallel between the subjective sovereignty of the individual will and the objective sovereignty of the State; since the will of the State is the concrete actualization of the abstract autonomy of the individual will, advancing the development of freedom, the will of the State is supreme over the individual will. The will of the State is the

individual's real will, especially insofar as all individuals seek a general good (HP, 7:213).

Marx (1818-1883) is influenced by Hegel's focus on concrete reality when he opposes any natural law that is not immanent to history, but he is critical of Hegel's theory of the State that rests on the rights of private property when he states that the State alienates human nature insofar as it transcends individuals and their interests (HP, 7:307). To him, economics determines all aspects of social life, including law, morality, religion and philosophy, and to the extent that one class owns the means of production and so dominates social life, it uses the State as an instrument of its own interests (HP, 7:321). While revolutionaries must take control of the State to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie, the movement from capitalism to communism ultimately requires the withering away of the State (HP, 7:328). For Marx, the concept of class replaces the theory of the State. The significance of this is that sovereignty is not political. Any notion of sovereignty is suspect because it implies the transcendence of an ideology over individuals.

Nietzsche (1844-1900) either brings to its highest pitch or horribly misshapes the Enlightenment view of sovereignty. He takes half of the self-legislating subject—retaining the notion that the subject wills its own laws, but refusing the notion that the laws willed by the subject are universal. Moral laws are either purely personal and easily revised according to our own needs, or rooted in the interests of society at particular points in time (HP, 7:392). Nietzsche's free-spirit is the supreme legislator for itself in the absence of social sanctions or divine order (HP, 7:404). He has no political concept of sovereignty, preferring to forgo the petty politics of competing and negotiating interests in favor of a grand politics concerned with breeding geniuses from the herd of humanity. He considers states, especially

democratic ones, as a hindrance to the development of the free spirit (HP, 7:413).

## **2.2. Two Types of Contemporary Anarchism**

Anarchists like Bakunin, Kropotkin and Proudhon might be thought of as those who inherit and heighten the antipathy towards the state and its laws at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, our focus is anarchism as it is understood today. It is useful to distinguish two types of contemporary anarchism: the ‘classical’ anarchism considered by Ritter, Taylor and Crowder, and the ‘postmodern’ anarchism developed by Levinas and Derrida. The first sort of anarchists do not entirely reject organization, but rather seek a better relation of freedom and order, though still in favour of freedom. To them, freedom is preserved and protected when order is only naturally emergent among groups. If there is no established state, then the spontaneously organized relations of community are even more urgent. These anarchists’ arguments for greater freedom often depend on faith in the moral self-direction of individuals unhindered by governments. The second sort of anarchism stands for an absolute responsibility that befalls us before we can conceive and choose our obligations. While the face-to-face ethical relation takes place outside of the state and civil society, the presence of a third party makes it necessary to translate the call to justice into general laws. These anarchists believe that those who appear as outlaws in relation to a specific system of justice may protect the real spirit of the law and advance the ideal of universal justice.

### 2.2.1. Communal Individuality in Classical Anarchism

Alan Ritter recognizes that anarchism is often confused, on the one hand, with libertarianism or extreme forms of liberalism, and on the other hand, with socialism or communism. He thinks that it is neither. To him, anarchism is too communal to be the former and too individualist to be the latter; anarchists are communal individualists.<sup>2</sup> However, he admits that there is reason for the confusion between liberals and anarchists, because both value individual freedom and acknowledge that humanity has the potential to use it for good or evil. They both desire a society that is not autocratic but coercive enough to control undesirable behavior. They part ways when liberals say that the need for such a society is satisfied by a representative state with limited legislative and executive powers, while anarchists say that such a society demands the destruction of the state in order that the people can organize themselves according to public censure (A, 120). To him, the confusion of socialism and anarchism is harder to understand, because they differ radically as to the effectiveness of the state: socialists think that the right type of state could change human nature and lead to the eventual redundancy of the state, while anarchists think that the state is inherently evil and will always hinder the full development of humanity's moral capacity. His incredulity about this confusion seems disingenuous, since the distinction between these positions is sometimes one of degree rather than kind, as debates between Marx, Engels and Bakunin, as well as Lenin's views, attest. For Ritter, anarchism is not a combination of liberalism and socialism, but a distinct political theory in its own right (A, 127).

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<sup>2</sup>Alan Ritter, *Anarchism: A Theoretical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 117; cited hereafter as A.

Ritter states that ‘communal individuality’ rather than freedom is the aim of anarchism. He defines ‘individuality’ as a well-developed sense of self, and ‘community’ as an awareness of the reciprocal relation between oneself and others. For anarchists, these two things belong together; one develops oneself by considering others, and one’s relation to others is key to developing oneself (A, 26-27). Communal individuality is the real goal because anarchists are willing to restrict freedom to achieve it. Freedom is subordinate to individuality and community, especially to communal individuality, since freedom is meaningless outside of this double dimension of life. Ritter proposes a scaled-down version of freedom when he says he is not opposed to limiting it, as long as it is limited as a result of the rational deliberation of all individuals. Thus anarchists appeal to public censure rather than laws to shape behavior (A, 18). To Ritter, certain anarchist ideals seem compatible with direct democracy, but they are opposed to unanimous consensus and legal government because peer pressure and impersonal representatives run against the grain of individuality and community (A, 62).

Michael Taylor also thinks that community is crucial to anarchy, though, community is not so much an aim as a fact of nature. He does not defend community as an ideal or make moral claims about it, but simply states that “community is *necessary*—if people are to live without a state.”<sup>3</sup> He thinks that the more a society displays the characteristics of a community, the more it is anarchistic, and vice versa. According to him, community comprises three things: a set of common values and beliefs, though there will always be

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<sup>3</sup>Michael Taylor, *Community, Anarchy and Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 3; cited hereafter as CAL.

some variation; direct and multi-faceted relations in which representation and specialization, or organization around a single activity, are minimized; and reciprocal relations between members (CAL, 26-28). He thinks there is a scale of anarchies. On one end of the scale, anarchy is characteristic of primitive societies, from acephalous communities to chiefdoms. On the other end of the scale, he considers as quasi-anarchies or ‘the societies within states’ feudal peasant communities and 19<sup>th</sup> century communes (CAL, 33).

The critical test of anarchism is whether or not it sustains social order. Taylor thinks that anarchy is a stateless society, but this does not mean it is without rules. He compares statehood to social order. He supplements the definition of the state as an association in which there is a monopoly of force within a territory with the need to identify those who are authorized to use force (CAL, 5). If complete anarchy is understood as an absence of force or even an absence of unequal use of force, then there is no historical example of it; all societies have some concentration of force. He rejects any notion of complete anarchy and refers instead to partial anarchy (CAL, 6). Anarchy is neither an absence of power, understood as an ability to change people’s behavior through threats or rewards, nor an absence authority, understood as a legitimate exercise of power through persuasion or reasons. No such society is possible (CAL, 7). He defines anarchy as a community which limits the concentration of force as a means to uphold collective decisions, but determines rules by equal participation and non-coercive social controls. While it performs many of the functions attributed to states, it is not by nature a state. To Taylor, an equitable and non-coercive social order is how we should understand the ‘statelessness’ of anarchist community (CAL, 10).

Taylor thinks that the equitable and non-coercive social order in anarchistic

community comes from reciprocity between members, though it must emerge spontaneously out of their relations and not be imperative imposed on them. The definitive feature of anarchistic social order is that it is not alien to those that it orders because there is direct participation in decisions and a lack of specialized roles for control, and this distinguishes anarchy as a form of social order which maximizes freedom (CAL, 75). He identifies four kinds of social control used by anarchistic communities in varying degrees: “(i) the threat of self-help retaliation, (ii) the offer of reciprocity and the threat of its withdrawal, (iii) the use of the sanctions of approval and disapproval, the latter especially *via* gossip, ridicule and shame, and (iv) the threat of witchcraft accusations and of supernatural sanctions” (CAL, 91).

The persistence of various constraints in anarchistic community raises the issue of the compatibility between order and freedom. Taylor thinks that order need not be compromised if freedom is greatly valued (CAL, 141). The basis of his argument is that the only notion of freedom that is not confused is negative freedom, wherein one’s actions are not prevented by the actions of others, while the notion positive freedom as autonomy is unclear (CAL, 148). To him, two things define autonomy: rationality and authenticity. Rationality is not enough for autonomy because one’s actions may be deliberate, but one can also accept the set of needs and norms from others. When authenticity is considered, it is still not certain what it means to say that one’s choices are one’s own. This is usually explained by saying that choices are authentic when they come from a ‘core self’ and a result of ‘critical acceptance’ (CAL, 149). It is possible that Taylor has a narrow view of autonomy. That is, rationality is not merely deliberation among alternative actions, and authenticity is



not evidenced by ideas that are self-caused and self-criticized. Kant emphasizes that the condition in which freedom and reason do not correspond is not autonomy but heteronomy.

Taylor doubts that the ideal of autonomy is achievable, if it requires that one subject one's values to critical scrutiny to fashion a coherent set of values, as well as choose or create a social character with which one can identify. For example, feeling at home in a coherent world and having a social character are not difficult for those in primitive and peasant societies, yet we cannot call this condition autonomy (CAL, 160-161). He turns his attention to utopias, where the danger is that an institutionalized ideology interferes with what would otherwise be direct and multi-faceted relations. If community provides detailed regulations for behavior, it curtails autonomy, but as long as it is possible for people to leave, the framework can be considered a chosen one, preserving autonomy (CAL, 164). While autonomy is not as important as community, to the extent that we create communities we create autonomy also. His argument for anarchy is thus that fundamental freedom is provided in community as a social order with common values allowing variation, direct participation and reciprocal relationships (CAL, 167).

Taylor thinks that anarchy is approximated most closely by primitive acephalous communities, and to a diminishing extent from peasant communities to utopian communities. Since it is impossible to return to primitive conditions, and since there are problems in maintaining the integrity of anarchist communities under pressure to become states when surrounded by states, he has little optimism about anarchy for the future (CAL, 168). However, he thinks that if the creation of contemporary anarchy is possible, then it is likely to occur in one of two ways. The first form is the creation of "whole communities" with the

aim of structural renewal. Such communities are not entirely anarchistic, because they are merely social enclaves and they must manage themselves so that common ideology and strong leadership do not restrict their freedom (CAL, 169). The second form is the creation of what could be called “partial communities,” which covers an array of cooperatives, collectives and associations organized to satisfy specific needs in the community, involving direct action and mutual aid. This is a self-management model, but it leaves unanswered the question about the aims to which action is directed (CAL, 170).

George Crowder also claims that anarchy is not the total rejection of social order, but he nonetheless places more emphasis on freedom than the other two theorists. “‘Anarchy,’ in the sense that it is the goal of anarchists, means the absence of a ruler or government, and this should be distinguished from the more common sense of ‘anarchy’ as the absence of order.”<sup>4</sup> Anarchy is social order without coercion. Thus, anarchists reject rules enforced by governments, but not the principles of prudence wherein order is freely self-imposed. To him, the inviolable value of freedom rather than the equitable and non-coercive order of community gives the anarchist argument its coherence. He thinks that it must be seen in the historical context of the Enlightenment, after which the inchoate anti-authoritarian currents converge into reasoned challenges to the state and civil society (CA, 6).

Crowder claims that to appreciate the consistency of anarchist theory, it must be acknowledged that its view of freedom is not negative, because it does not only seek the absence of constraints. Failure to recognize this leads to the prevalent complaint that

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<sup>4</sup>George Crowder, *Classical Anarchism: The Political Thought of Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1; cited hereafter as CA.

anarchism is a self-contradictory political position because freedom is incompatible with social order (CA, 8). The constraint of censure is necessary in Ritter's and Taylor's account, but it courts the tyranny of public opinion which could become more oppressive than the state, a possibility that makes their view inconsistently anarchistic. This problem is partially remedied by showing that freedom requires critical rationality, but critical rationality is limited because it is only procedural and not substantial. Critical rationality allows us to judge actions as free if they arise out of individual deliberation, but by itself critical rationality could lead one to accept moral as well as immoral actions as long as they were the result of individual deliberation (CA, 9).

Crowder thinks that anarchism promotes the positive view of freedom as the ability to rationally direct oneself to morality. He assumes that if individuals are unhindered by public pressure or state sanctions, they will always recognize and obey moral laws (ibid, 10). We are free when we govern our actions according to moral laws that each one of us determines for himself or herself. This means neither that moral laws are simply what we say they are, nor that their universality is a function of social consensus. They are natural laws, capable of discovery by anyone who reasons critically (CA, 11). Thus he thinks that freedom is not just a procedure of individual deliberation plus obedience to social constraints maintained by those with whom we live, but the autonomy of the authentic self in whom reason and morality correspond (CA, 12).

Though the idea of moral-self direction according to natural law is not peculiar to anarchists, but runs through the perfectionist tradition from Plato to the Enlightenment that assumes that human interests fit into a harmonious pattern, Crowder acknowledges that the

idea has fallen out of favor recently (CA, 13). Though Hegel ties moral self-direction understood as ‘ethical life’ or *Sittlichkeit* to the State, it is possible to extract anti-State sentiments from moral self-direction, and anarchists most explicitly express this tendency (CA, 14). Where anarchists differ from libertarians, whether individualist or socialist, is that they do not think that moral self-direction can occur in a fully-fledged State or by adopting the functions and effects of the State because it only happens without the State (CA, 15). Anarchists worry that the State passes off its interests as those of the people and oppresses them in their own name. They try to avoid this by promoting freedom without the potentially authoritarian State—hence the significance of moral self-direction (CA, 16).

Crowder wrestles with the criticisms usually leveled at the anarchists’ argument against the State. One objection is that the negative freedom from constraints is unavoidable and not entirely incompatible with the positive freedom of moral self-direction; it is possible that coercion does not oppose but promotes moral self-direction. He thinks that the idea of being forced to be free by governments must be rejected because it is a justification for authoritarianism which cannot be accepted without self-contradiction (CA, 171). To the objection that moral self-direction is too vague to guide people, he replies that freedom is often incorporated into laws, but the State is the most brutish form of this incorporation. Furthermore, moral self-direction already has the universally normative quality of rationality, which renders redundant the enforcing function of the State (CA, 177). Critics of anarchism also say that if individuals are improved through moral self-direction, then the State comprised of individuals would improve apace, so we could accept the existence of the State because it will be better. He points out that the State would be unnecessary when individuals

reach perfection (CA, 178). Yet the ideal of perfectability relies on faith in the rational and moral potential of individuals, making it the weakest link in the anarchists' argument. To the degree that they are atheistic, they undercut the theistic interpretation of humanity that surreptitiously supports perfectionism. Without a unified world-view it is hard to have universal agreement, and he admits that the universal agreement on moral laws sought by anarchists has not been forthcoming (CA, 183). Ultimately, the anarchists' argument for the abolition of the State is incomplete unless it includes an account of alternative stateless societies. Crowder doubts the possibility of such alternatives in modern industrial society (CA, 192).

Who best represents the case for anarchism? Ritter and Taylor downplay the value of freedom and develop the idea of communal individuality. They think that there must be order other than the autonomous or authentic self because they are not optimistic about humanity. To them, the anarchist calls for less authoritarian forms of self-government, hence the significance of censure over coercion. Is this compromise still anarchist? Crowder thinks not; despite his doubts, he is optimistic enough to think that there is obedience to natural law outside the State. Perhaps the difference between them is not great. While Ritter and Taylor recognize the necessity of constraint, Crowder adds it to his definition of freedom by interpreting it as something discovered by individuals rather than imposed by society. However, Crowder's idea of freedom cannot account for how individuals actually become morally self-directed, or how individuals who either have no direction or are diverted from it are redirected. This is an oversight, since it is difficult to deny that the moral understanding of an authentic self is still socially constructed. He considers others unnecessary in one's

moral life. The retreat into the morally self-directed individual rejects what others think is the communal ideal of anarchism.

### 2.2.2. Being Before the Law in Postmodern Anarchism

Levinas and Derrida recognize the interplay of freedom and order seen in classical anarchism. They extend into postmodernism the idea of moral self-direction according to natural law as an argument against the State. Since their thought is closer in spirit to the work of Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy, it is important to consider them. They offer further resources for the framework of this thesis.

In *Totality and Infinity* (1961) Levinas defines anarchy as “a world absolutely silent” wherein there is no knowledge to guide our response to others.<sup>5</sup> To him, the truth of ontology is not the foundation for justice in community, but the concern for justice in community is the condition for knowing the truth in ontology. He thinks that the relative stability of epistemological and ethical relations to the world and others are premised on an anarchy, the lack of principles (TI, 99).

Levinas develops these ideas in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974), where he understands anarchy in the same sense as the words ‘anachronistic’ and ‘anterior’ to mean a condition before rules rather than an absence of rules. He characterizes anarchy as a responsibility for the other that befalls us before we can consciously choose our obligations to others; it is an inexpressible imperative of ethics prior to the posited principles

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<sup>5</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 90; cited hereafter as TI.

of morality. Anarchical responsibility for the other is “older than the ego, prior to principles.”<sup>6</sup> For Levinas, anarchy does not imply the absence of responsibility, but the absoluteness of responsibility. He considers responsibility anarchically to elevate it over subjectivist interpretations that limit it to an intention that may or may not be fulfilled or an obedience to the dictates of duty. “The antecedence of responsibility to freedom would signify the Goodness of the Good: the necessity that the Good choose me before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome its choice” (OB, 122).

Levinas thinks that anarchy, as a condition that exists before rather than after the distinction of order from disorder, is neither the threat of disorder to order nor the frustration of attempts to fashion order out of disorder (OB, 101). Anarchy pre-originates order and disorder without meaning that it is the origin of them. Rather, order and disorder are responses to the unconditional condition of anarchy. Levinas defines anarchy in opposition to those who see it as parasitic on the State or appropriated by the State:

The notion of anarchy we are introducing here has a meaning prior to the political (or antipolitical) meaning currently attributed to it. It would be self-contradictory to set it up as a principle (in the sense that anarchists understand it). Anarchy cannot be sovereign, like an *archè*. It can only disturb the State—but in a radical way, making possible moments of negation *without any* affirmation. The State then cannot set itself up as a whole. But, on the other hand, anarchy can be stated. Yet disorder has an irreducible meaning, as refusal of synthesis. (OB, 194)

Anarchy negates the State, but it does not and must not offer any alternatives to the State. This is not to say that alternatives are unnecessary; rather, they are not anarchical, but effects and functions of the State. Yet anarchy is never an *archè*, because the lack of rule cannot be

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<sup>6</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 117; cited hereafter as OB.

the rule. To maintain permanent anarchy is to reduce its anarchical quality; it is to turn it into the self-contradiction of an order of disorder. Anarchy cannot maintain itself, which is why sovereignty and the State are necessary for stability in life (OB, 196). Levinas stresses that sovereignty and the State arise out of anarchy, and that any order is an unauthorized power that never overcomes its anarchical conditions. Thus, when sovereign states are torn between order and disorder, such as when a contest of incompatible principles threatens to devolve into a lack of principles, it is because they are built from the beginning on anarchy, not because they are weak or waning forms of political power.

The tension between the unrest or restlessness of anarchy and the stability of sovereignty and the State means that our ethical responsibility to the particular other does not absolve us of our political responsibility to others in general. This possibility arises with the appearance of ‘the third party’ who interrupts the immediate face-to-face relation between oneself and the other and instigates a relation in need of mediation (OB, 157). The third party is outside the relation of one to the other, but also inside it insofar as oneself and the other recognize the wider demands he or she represents. The third party is not included in the intimacy of ethics but inaugurates the institutions of politics: “The extraordinary commitment of the other to the third party calls for control, a search for justice, society and the State, comparison and possession, thought and science, commerce and philosophy, and outside of anarchy, the search for a principle” (OB, 161).

The persistence of anarchy means that the search for principles of justice does not end in the establishment of legal relations; justice is not contained in institutions. Justice is not above and beyond the relations between individuals, but bound up with the contingent and



provisional relations between them. We cannot appeal to pure procedure in deciding each case as a unique one. There is no common measure from which to judge, judgement makes its order from disorder. In other words, justice must come to terms with anarchy without terminating anarchy. Thus, the anarchical responsibility does not preclude the need to do justice, and justice does not degrade the importance of anarchical responsibility: "In no way is justice . . . a limitation of anarchic responsibility. . . . The equality of all is borne by my inequality, the surplus of my duties over my rights" (OB, 159). Anarchy persists in sovereign states insofar as my asymmetrical relation with every other is the basis of the symmetrical relations among all others. I am unequally indebted to every other, but there is equality in society as a whole. Anarchical responsibility is required to maintain the uniqueness of oneself and the other in each judgement, since the State tends to dissolve the uniqueness of oneself and the other by integrating us into a 'we' governed by a general law (OB, 161).

In "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas" (1962) Derrida shows the influence of Levinas, but he expresses reservations about anarchical responsibility. To him, the anarchy of responsibility prior to the authority of law is the essence of ethics outside metaphysics and morality.<sup>7</sup> Anarchy is responsible to the other because it is a 'non-violent' concern for the specificity of each existent that resists reduction to the 'violence' of generality that required by all rule-governed systems. Yet he shows that anarchy is also irresponsible to others because it cannot justify itself before them, and any attempt to do so does violence to the non-violent relation. He interprets Levinas'

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<sup>7</sup>Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 81; cited hereafter as VM.

Ethics of Ethics as a challenge to all laws, but points out that it becomes the Law of Laws, the law that all laws must be challenged (VM, 111). He thinks that Levinas betrays his intentions by philosophically representing anarchy in a theory about the non-theorizability of The Good, which he takes this as evidence that complete anarchy is impossible (VM, 151).

In *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (1996), Derrida returns to this theme when he wonders if it is possible for the anarchical responsibility of oneself for the other to found a politics or a legal system. He assumes that it is impossible, adding that this impossibility is not a failure but the value of anarchism.<sup>8</sup> To him, the key to justice is remaining in a state of suspension between the specificity of ethics and the generality of politics, touching down lightly, if at all, in provisional positions. He calls for ever-renewed and groundless decisions that resist following procedure or fulfilling programs (AEL, 21). He refers to the pre-originary responsibility of the face-to-face relation between oneself and the other which is repressed when the State originates to regulate relations according to the third party. Yet the State cannot be neglected or negated to maintain anarchy; we must still satisfy the demand for justice, not only immediately, but in mediation. The Other is welcomed in anarchy, but the third party appears “without waiting” to signal the start of justice (AEL, 29). This means that the generality of laws does not hold back until the specificity of ethics is satisfied; they happen at the same time. The anarchical responsibility of oneself to the other is never escaped or superceded by establishing systems of justice in the State, but at the same time

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<sup>8</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 20; cited hereafter as AEL.

it is necessary to succeed ethics with politics, translating the call justice into conscious choices about institutions (AEL, 30). The force of ethics exceeds the procedures of politics; our responsibility exceeds the satisfaction of legal rules. The infinite demands of ethics are harder and more risky than the expedience of politics. Decisions about justice must be open to the possibility of good or evil equally, of hospitality or hostility to the other, but decisions must be made or there is no justice at all (AEL, 35).

Derrida draws attention to the tension between the Hellenistic and Hebraic conceptions of politics in Levinas's reflections on the nature of the State. Two of Levinas's essays, "The State of Caesar and the State of David" (1971) and "Politics After!" (1979), define a state that is "at once intra-political and transpolitical, at once *for and against* the 'state principle' . . . the 'tyranny of the State' which participate in the State but corrupt the State" (AEL, 73). He claims that the Western tradition of politics represented by the State of Caesar is bested by the Jewish tradition of politics represented by the State of David because it opens the possibility of a messianic politics that moves us toward a new world: "When he says 'beyond politics,' 'politics' always means this non-messianic politics of the State, which is transgressed toward its beyond by that which is nonetheless remains a politics, but a messianic politics" (AEL, 74). Levinas's provocative and paradoxical position is expressed in "Beyond the State in the State" (1988), wherein he thinks that politics has the structure of "*beyond-in*: transcendence in immanence, *beyond* the political, but *in* the political" (AEL, 76). Derrida he admits that Levinas makes it possible to think in terms other than the hegemony of the State; neither politically nor apolitically, but ethically. He thinks that this is "an apparent paradox: anarchy, true anarchy, must be paternal—as the only

effective protestation against the ‘tyranny of the State’” (AEL, 95). The paternalism of anarchy is evident in the view that it is a power that protects us from the abuse of power in the state and guides us to goodness outside of the state. It is revealed in Levinas’s aim of a universal justice which states should develop but always fail to do, a universal justice which ultimately points outside of the State and its laws from within the State and its laws (AEL, 110).

In *The Gift of Death* Derrida investigates the tension between one’s obligation to the totality of humanity or the State and one’s obligation to the infinite ideal of universal justice. To the extent that we are obligated by both laws, we are responsible and irresponsible at the same time. Anarchical responsibility is simultaneously a refusal of general laws and an appeal to absolute law.

The ethical can therefore end up making us irresponsible. It is a temptation, a tendency, or a facility that would sometimes have to be refused in the name of a responsibility that doesn’t keep account or give an account, neither to man, to humans, to society, to one’s fellows, or to one’s own.<sup>9</sup>

Derrida describes the tension between general and absolute law as one between two types of violence: the generality of law in the State, which violates the specifics of each case in order to render judgments, and the absolute law of universal justice, which violates the attempts to render judgments. However, these two forms of violence are the same insofar as their origin is the violence that founds and enforces all laws. This tension between general and absolute law is at the heart of any community whose concept of responsibility allows them to admit that its present practices may not satisfy its expressed principles (GD, 61).

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<sup>9</sup>Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 61-62; cited hereafter as GD.

To the anarchist, the state is only legalized violence, whether it is committed against its own members or humanity in general, though he or she appears violent to law-abiding members of the state in his or her opposition to legalized violence. The anarchist appeals to a higher law in order to justify his or her actions, but that justification will be foreign to the laws already accepted by society. For Derrida, the difficulty confronting the anarchist is the demand to address the original violence which underlies society or the laws of equal exchange by appealing to a higher authority, while realizing that there is no access to the past where the violent event took place and that the higher authority, the law of law, never speaks to us. The result is that the anarchist tries unsuccessfully to establish and sustain a non-violent law outside of the legitimation of violence in law.

In “Before the Law” (1982), Derrida claims that he cannot reach the origin of the law to disarm its violence because there is no origin of law to reach. To him, the force of law is anarchical because it is anterior and anachronistic to all laws, a non-historical imperative from which the history of imperatives emerges. “To be invested with its categorical authority, the law must be without history, genesis, or any possible derivation. That would be *the law of the law*. Pure morality has no history.”<sup>10</sup> There are certainly specific histories of when and how specific laws are established, but there is no general history of the force of law or what makes a law a law. “What remains concealed and invisible in each law is thus presumably the law itself, that which makes law of these laws, the being-law of these laws” (BL, 192). According to Derrida, it is the authority of law prior to all laws that humanity

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<sup>10</sup>Jacques Derrida, “Before the Law,” *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), 191; cited hereafter as BL.

confronts: “Before the law, the man is a subject of the law in appearing before it. This is obvious, but since he is *before* it because he cannot enter it, he is also *outside the law* (an outlaw). He is neither under the law nor in the law. He is both a subject of the law and an outlaw” (BL, 204). By being before the law, each of us is split into one who wants access to it and one who guards it. Anarchy is not an attitude which we can take or not take to law but the nature of our ambivalent relation to law; we are always outlaws within law, rejecting positive laws in order to reach or protect the truth of law (BL, 206).

Derrida explores the paradoxical position of the outlaw within law in “The Laws of Reflection: Nelson Mandela, In Admiration” (1987), where he characterizes Mandela as a mirror in which his personal and professional respect for law shows up apartheid’s rejection of law.<sup>11</sup> When he appears before the law he makes the law appear. In his defense he tells the story of his life to reflect the light of justice and make visible what the ruling order keeps invisible, the violence at the heart of law (LR, 34). Derrida’s reflections turn on two levels of law—the positive law in the country and the spirit of law in conscience—as well as two meanings of the word ‘witness’ to say that testimony concerns the past of a previously supplanted order and the future and an order yet to come.

So the exemplary witnesses are often those who distinguish between the law and laws, between respect for the law which speaks immediately to the conscience and submission to positive law (historical, national, institutional). Conscience is not only memory but promise. The exemplary witnesses, those who make us think about the law they reflect, are those who, in certain situations, *do not respect* laws. (LR, 38)

Mandela’s simultaneous respect for law as such and lack of respect for the laws of the land

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<sup>11</sup>Jacques Derrida, “The Laws of Reflection,” *For Nelson Mandela*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Mustapha Tlili (New York: Seaver Books, 1987), 31; cited hereafter as LR.

casts him as an outlaw within the law. His position is anarchical and anachronistic, challenging law to change law, and appealing to the past outside the present in order to begin again for the future. Of course, Mandela does not describe himself as an anarchist but as a democrat. The suggestion is that anarchism—as a simultaneous rejection of actual laws and an appeal to the ideal law—is an aspect of democracy, especially one in need of reminding about its principles. Derrida questions the foundations and functions of law in democracy, but he does not mean anarchy as lawlessness but as a condition prior to and permeating law. He thinks that anarchism is present in democracies that appeal to universal justice.

Despite the occasional claims of Levinas, Derrida and their supporters that this is a radical new direction for political philosophy, it is not much more than a recasting of the theory of natural law, one indebted to theology's separation of human and divine. Like classical anarchists, they think that anarchy has a moral dimension in its ideal of universal justice irreducible to legal relations in the state. Unlike classical anarchists, their argument is not that anarchy is achieved only in community outside of the state, but that anarchy is the actual ontological condition of our existence prior to any community we establish together. The problem emerges when we wonder how we are supposed to understand and satisfy the demands of anarchical responsibility given Levinas's and Derrida's accounts of it. Both of them consider responsibility anarchical precisely because it is beyond understanding and above all attempts to satisfy it. This is an unmistakably theological notion, whether it is the Hebraic injunction against depicting the divine or the Christian celebration of the unfathomable gift of grace. A politics based on an unrepresentable natural law is problematic.

### 2.3. The Anarchism of Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy

Two types of contemporary anarchism have been described as a framework for understanding the political philosophy of Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy. In the first, anarchy is the freedom to develop innate moral self-direction in the context of communal individuality, which demands that the external constraint of the state must be abolished. In the second, anarchy is the absolute responsibility prior to the choice of obligations in society, which is opposed to but never overcome by the state. Both of these arguments are for 'partial' rather than 'complete' anarchy, insofar as social constraint is necessary to ensure moral self-direction and a legal system is required to satisfy the demands of justice. They point to the interplay of freedom and order within anarchist communities.

Before I discuss Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy, I must mention that none of these three thinkers are characterized as anarchists by themselves or prominent students of their work. According to Todd May in *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*, political philosophy inhabits the space between what is and what ought to be, description and prescription, as distinct from either metaphysics and ethics, which are associated with one or other of these poles).<sup>12</sup> He identifies three types of political philosophy: formal, strategic and tactical. Formal thought is attached to either pole of the is-ought distinction, either metaphysics or ethics, whether it is a theory that assumes our natural inclination is rational self-interest or altruism, or whether it is a theory that maintains the status quo or seeks to change the present situation in society (PA, 4-5). Strategic thought appears with the passage

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<sup>12</sup>Todd May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 1; cited hereafter as PA.



from attachment to one or other pole to the interplay between them, represented by communist concern for directing the dialectic of history, for example. In this type of thought ethics is not subordinate to history, since conditions can change, yet history is not secondary either, since it is not simply a justification for action but the index of possibilities for action (PA, 7). Tactical thought shares the strategic preference for interplay between the poles of the is-ought distinction, but whereas strategic thought identifies a primary problematic to account for most social injustices, and thereby thinks that power derives from the site where that primary problematic is focused, tactical thought denies the idea that there is a primary problematic and hence a center where power is located. Power is irreducible to one problematic and thus there is no privileged position, or vanguard, from which to analyze and act in politics (PA, 11).

May claims that the forerunner of tactical thinking is anarchism. He presents anarchism as a framework for understanding poststructuralism. Moreover, he proposes poststructuralistic anarchism as a corrective development from classical anarchism (PA, 13). He seeks an alternative to the dominant discourses of liberal capitalism and socialist communism, and finds it in three poststructuralists—Foucault, Deleuze and Lyotard—whose common defining feature is the anarchist's tactical commitment to micropolitics as opposed to macropolitics (PA, 3). It is important to note, since it is what I am objecting to, that he thinks that only these three qualify as tactical political philosophers; others are disqualified for having no articulated political position, or for being formal or strategic rather than tactical (PA, 12).

While I agree that anarchism is the most suitable framework for understanding the

political philosophy of poststructuralism, it is not necessary to accept the view that only tactical thinking is a feature of anarchism, and that among contemporary thinkers only the three poststructuralists he identifies are anarchists. The first limits restricts the scope of anarchism. There are times when anarchists have displayed formal and strategic characteristics, but are still anarchistic. For example, the notion of moral self-direction might make them ethical, while the appeal to natural law might make them metaphysical, and both of these positions are to be found in the formal category. To the extent that they are interested in supporting moral self-direction with reference to natural law, the interplay of these two poles is strategic. Furthermore, it would presumably be an anarchist ‘tactic’ to use formal or strategic thought, depending on its adversary or aim at any given time. Anarchism would use whatever would advance its agenda, even macropolitical theory, though interpreted or transposed as only one aspect of its micropolitical practice.

Secondly, it is true that neither Bataille, Blanchot nor Nancy explicitly call themselves anarchists, but there is textual support for the idea that it is not foreign to their thought. In regard to the key feature of anarchism—hostility to the state—all three thinkers argue against the state, for just those reasons anarchists usually give. In particular, they see the state as an illegitimate limitation of freedom, an unnecessary mediation between the intentions and actions of the people, and an abstract legislative function that intervenes and interrupts our ability to govern ourselves according to universal justice. As to their anti-representational stance, Bataille claims that the power of life and the reality of the street cannot be accommodated into political positions, Blanchot thinks that various forms of community cannot be incorporated into the political body, though Nancy wants to rethink

the notion of sovereign state more seriously. In terms of the autonomy necessary for moral self-direction, Bataille stresses that sovereignty is an absence of servility to all but the most absolute value of the sacred outside the state, Blanchot emphasizes the importance of insubordination against corrupt politics, and Nancy thinks that the experience of freedom requires us to face the decision of being beyond political organizations. To this end, all of them appeal to some form of natural law. For Bataille, it is the unproductive expenditure of life underlying and undermining all productive activity; for Blanchot, our responsibility to the other prior to our choice of obligations; and for Nancy, our being before the global law of the world as a whole. Most importantly, all of them take community as an anarchistic social order outside any permanent institutions of the state. It remains now to take a closer look for the instances where anarchism plays an important role in their texts.

## CHAPTER 3

### BATAILLE: THE ABSENT COMMUNITY AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF THE SACRED

No one is free not to belong to my *absence of community*.  
In the same way, the *absence of myth* is the only inevitable myth.

— Georges Bataille, “Take It or Leave It”

#### 3.0. Introduction

Georges Bataille’s concept of community is based on his belief in the communal character of humanity. However, to him, the communal character of humanity expresses neither the essence of human nature nor the essence of community, but the inherent insufficiency of beings and the relationality that shatters both the identity of individuals and the integrity of communities. He thinks that the place of humanity in the totality of existence is experienced through the activities concerning the sacred. These activities threaten the stability of the state and civil society but ultimately try to unify humanity outside realm of the state and civil society. The sacred is expressed by the myths of a community, but the relation between myth and community is not simple in contemporary life. He announces the absence of myth and community, though he thinks that this absence is nonetheless the myth and the community to which we now belong. Anarchism emerges with his claim that authentic community in industrial society is an effect of the effervescent choices of its members. This poses a problem because it neglects the institutions and traditions that support

community. Bataille's interest in the sacred also affects his view of sovereignty as a relation of freedom and order, individuals and community, insofar as sovereignty is the heterological element of the sacred beyond the homogeneity of social order. To him, the sacred has an anarchistic quality in its resistance to the every form of the State. This emphasis on the sacred results in an ambivalent relation to communism, fascism and democracy, which is problematic for assessing his contribution to political philosophy.

### **3.1. From the Absence of Community to the Community of Absence**

To Bataille, community never achieves the condition of a unity or totality, but a consistency in which members have no autonomy from the whole. To him, consistency is a loose yet localized relation of elements but it is more than a mere collection of elements. This suggestion is borne out by his distinction between composition and aggregation as forms of social organization. He uses the term 'composition' to refer to a association of elements that are modified by their membership in the whole or integrated to the same scale, and 'aggregation' to refer to a collection in which the elements are not modified by their membership in the whole nor modeled on a similar scale. For him, the organization of elements into a multiplicity is either composed or aggregated, and a relation is a community if it is ordered according to the first form of organization (CS, 73-84).

Bataille tries to occupy a middle ground with respect to the relation of individuals and community throughout his work. Those under the spell of individualism relegate community to a merely nominal status. While he does not deny that community is a real relation of individuals, he thinks that when community is thought to be nothing but the real

relation of individuals, one cannot consider community apart from the activities of individuals within it. If community is immanent to its members, then it has no transcendent quality. That makes it impossible to advance claims about the characteristics of community in general. However, he cannot accept that the reality of community leads to its reification as an abstraction over and above individuals. In this case community is so separate from individuals that it is impossible to see how community is linked to the lives of individuals.

Bataille's solution to the problem of the relation of community and individuals is indebted to Durkheim, whose methodological principles are that the whole of community is qualitatively different from the individuals that compose it, and that the sacred is of utmost importance to the consistency of community. The first principle claims that the condition of community is distinct from individual experiences of communal life. This accords community its own individuality, which arises from the combined qualities of its members but has a unique quality too. Community is understood as an organism whose constitution is present in the activities of its cells, but which subsists over and above the activities of its cells because it is not reducible to any one of them. The implication of this claim is that community has a reality which can be studied separately from individuals. The second principle claims that the sacred, the heterogeneous element around which homogeneous social life is ordered, is a key to understanding the reality of community. The sacred involves both the concrete actions of individuals and the transcendent quality of a community. The particular activities concerned with the sacred make a specific community distinct from other communities.

### 3.1.1. The Communal Character of Humanity

Bataille's concept of community is best understood in light of his notion of the communal character of humanity. To him, the basis of community is existential in that it involves the very structure and significance of humanity. He thinks that humanity is communal. However, his anti-essentialist interpretation of this fact is not what is usually understood as communitarian. While he accepts the basic claim of communitarians that individuals are constituted by community, that their identities are created by membership in communities, he pushes their premise to its extreme conclusion. To him, the idea that community constitutes individuals does not only mean that their identities are social, but that they have no identities because they only exist as elements in a differential relation. Belonging to a community does not grant identity to the individual by giving him or her a specific quality or right of membership, but rather challenges whatever identity the individual may have taken into the community by bringing him or her into confluence and conflict with others. For this reason, it is difficult for Bataille to refer to the communitarian nature of humanity, insofar as this implies an essence. Instead, it may be more helpful to refer to the communal character of humanity, which describes the inherent communality of humanity, but does not claim that communal life constitutes us similarly each and every time. To Bataille, two things in particular indicate the communal character of humanity without attributing an essence to humanity—the interplay of insufficiency and sufficiency and the ecstatic function of communication.

Bataille's reflections on the communal character of humanity are recorded in the three-volume 'Summa Atheologicae' comprised of *Inner Experience* (1943), *Guilty* (1944)

and *On Nietzsche* (1945). In “The Labyrinth” he claims that the social character of humanity is demonstrated by the inherent insufficiency of each entity. Ontologically, this signifies that nothing has the grounds for its own existence, and in practical terms it means the inability to meet the requirements for living by oneself alone. “At the basis of human life there exists a principle of insufficiency. On his own, each man imagines others to be incapable or unworthy of ‘being’. . . . The sufficiency of each being is challenged unceasingly by those who surround him” (IE, 81-82). There are two ways to interpret this insufficiency. From the perspective of individuality, insufficiency is the result of our inability to secure self-sufficiency because the satisfaction of our desires and needs is limited by the pursuits of others. From the perspective of community, insufficient individuals can achieve sufficiency within community or that sufficiency applies to social units composed of individuals. While we are each insufficient, we become more sufficient with others; we are complemented, if not completed, by them.

However, Bataille thinks that while we must acknowledge individual insufficiency, we do not become sufficient through our relations with others because all illusions of sufficiency are challenged by our relations to others. He thinks that community is not the ground or guarantee of sufficiency for the insufficient individual. Community has no essence above and beyond the individuals who compose it. Community insufficient too, composed of insufficiently coherent groups:

MAN IS A PARTICLE INSERTED IN UNSTABLE AND TANGLED GROUPS. These groups come to terms with the personal life to which they bring multiple possibilities (society gives to the individual the easy life). Once there is *knowledge*, the existence of a person is only isolated from that of the group by a narrow and negligible point of view. Only the instability of the relations . . . permits the illusion of a being which is isolated, folded back



on itself and which possesses the power to exist without some sort of exchange. (IE, 84)

The constitution of community is such that, while its structure transcends us, it also allows for freedom. The function of community is to secure us some measure of independence from the brute necessities of life. Yet the instability of community, its expansion and contraction, leads us to believe that our relative autonomy is instead radical autonomy. However, freedom from one group is the freedom to be part of other groups. When we imagine ourselves as isolated individuals we are opening the possibility of imagining ourselves as potential parts of a group greater than ourselves:

In the most general way, each element capable of being isolated from the universe always appears like a particle susceptible of entering into the constitution of a group which transcends it. . . . Being is always a group of particles whose relative autonomies are maintained. These two principles—constitution transcending the constituent parts, relative autonomy of the constituent parts—order the existence of each ‘being.’ (IE, 85)

Taken together, the two principles mean that community is not completely controlled by individuals, and likewise that the constitution of individuals by community is not total. Community is greater and less than the individuals that compose it. To exist is to be a particle in a composite: we are what we are through our participation in a larger order and our freedom from all larger orders. Being is a tension between the subsistence of community and the freedom of the individual. Being is communal because it is not attributed to each separate thing that exists, but is the interrelation of disparate elements and their relative autonomy from what structures them.

Bataille claims that these two principles lead to a third principle of human life: that the tension between maintaining one’s identity and integrity and participating in something

larger than oneself never overcome (IE, 85). Humanity is characterized by the attempt to attain some sense of universality or the totality of life. This can be achieved in two ways: we can oppose our autonomy to the world, taking ourselves as the universal, or surrender our autonomy to the world, participating in the universal. The desire for self-sufficiency apart from community unwittingly increases our inherent insufficiency because we are thrown further onto our own isolated individuality without becoming conscious of it. The desire for sufficiency in community requires that we admit our inherent insufficiency, and this admission helps us to overcome it through our relations with others. In other words, we are always struggling to complete ourselves, either in individuality or in community. If we avoid this struggle, we are not human, though to the extent that the struggle is unending, we never achieve the height of humanity. We cannot escape the perspective of individuality even when we seek universality, but must not lose sight of the fact that immersion in community is sometimes mistaken for universality. No matter how we choose to satisfy the desire for totality, individuality and community remain in tension. Bataille thus states that the aim of humanity is to become an individual by achieving “a constitution which is more and more vast,” and he suggests that humanity achieves universal value when individuals enter a community (IE, 91).

Bataille uses the term ‘communication’ for the tension between insufficient individuals and the dissatisfied desire for sufficiency in community. To him, communication occurs when individuals reach out to what is other than them, and he condemns the lack of communication as an “egotistic folding back into self” that is closed to others (N, 19). He thinks that, while we communicate because we are inherently insufficient (communication

is unnecessary to self-sufficient entities), communication does not satisfy our desire for sufficiency, but emphasizes our insufficiency in relation to others. “Communication cannot proceed from one full and intact individual to another. It requires individuals whose separate existence in themselves is *risked*” (N, 19).

Bataille’s discussion of communication also shows the way in which his thinking about the communal character of humanity is anti-essentialist. Communication involves risking our identity and integrity in moments of ecstasy. “Ecstasy is *communication* between terms . . . and communication possesses a value the terms didn’t have: it annihilates them” (G, 30). The ecstasy of communication ‘annihilates’ the individuals in relation because they cease to exist as self-sufficient and separate entities. It destroys their distinctness and demonstrates that they never had nor will have distinctness apart from others. “Here’s something to express forcefully, to keep in mind—that there’s no truth when people look at each other as if they’re separate individuals. Truth starts with conversations, shared laughter, friendship and sex, and it only happens *going from one person to another*” (G, 44-45). Bataille’s notion of ecstatic communication emphasizes the passage between things, rather than the property of things. He compares it to the electric spark leaping between two terminals. The truth is not a message that is transmitted between people, but that a message is transmitted between people; the truth is not communicated, but is communication itself. Bataille thinks that the truth is the communal character of humanity, our inherent relationality. The focus for the communication of the truth is the sacred—communication between beings occurs around the sacred.

### 3.1.2. The Primacy of the Sacred

With Roger Caillois, Michel Leiris and others, Bataille established the College of Sociology to satisfy his interest in the primary role of the sacred in community, not only by studying sacred communities, but by being a sacred community. Though influenced by Durkheim's sociological research into religious life, his comments in "Sacred Sociology" (1937) suggest that he does not seek knowledge of religion only but knowledge of all forms of ritualistic activity: "Hence it regards power and the army—sciences arts, and technology—insofar as they have a communifying value, in the active sense of the word, that is to say, insofar as they are the *creators* of unity" (SS, 74). Bataille defines the sacred as anything that has a 'communifying value' for a community. The particularity of any community is not determined by the elements that compose it, which may be the same as any other community, but by the sacred or communifying activity that makes those elements into that community rather than another (SS, 74). In this respect, he contrasts the term "mass" as an aggregation of atomic particles which maintain themselves in relation to each other, with the notion of "compound being" in which atomic particles are altered by their relation to each other (SS, 76). The sacred is what creates a community as the community it is by changing those who belong to it. To him, the communifying movement is distinct from the unanimity of the crowd and the autonomy of individuals. Compared to the communifying movement, neither extreme of unanimity and autonomy appreciate the relation of the parts to the whole because they attend to only one or the other (SS, 80).

On this basis of his consideration of the communifying movement of the sacred, he offers a specific definition of community: "The internal formations that regroup individuals

on a new plane are able to take the name 'community.' However, community will not be able strictly to designate a division subordinate to the primitive formation" (SS, 81). This last sentence is important. According to him, concern for the communifying movement of the sacred is secondary to the primary functions of community organized according to kinship and territory, but the communifying movement of the sacred becomes increasingly important to the point that kin and territory gets their value from it. In other words, ritualistic activities seem to threaten or suspend the normal order of the community at large but they ultimately preserve the vitality of existence in the community. In this context, he distinguishes between traditional community and elective community, but considers the latter truly deserving of the term (SS, 82).

In "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" (1938) Bataille indicates that his interest in the sacred is motivated by his worry that we are not connected to the whole of life which we are unable to shape to our own needs because we are functionaries serving society (VE, 223). He laments the loss of humanity's solidarity with the totality of existence with the dissociation of life into the separate social spheres of art (creation), science (knowledge) and politics (action), where each in their own way relinquish human destiny, either by avoiding reality or following the laws of reality—becoming escapist or being realistic (VE, 227). However, humanity still has an experience of solidarity with the totality of existence through an experience of the sacred which is expressed by myths. "Myth remains at the disposal of one who cannot be satisfied by art, science and politics. . . . Myth alone returns, to the one who is broken by every ordeal, the image of a plenitude extended to the community where men gather" (VE, 232). Thus myth unifies the three separated social spheres; it is a recreation of

the world that changes the activities of those who live it. The community devoted to myth is not contrary to the state or civil society, but the basis of social life. “Myth is born in ritual acts hidden from the static vulgarity of disintegrated society, but the violent dynamism that belongs to it has no other object than the return to lost totality” (VE, 233).

Following World War II, Bataille continues his preoccupation with the sacred in community. In “The Moral Meaning of Sociology” (1946) he thinks that the sacred and the profane are correctly categorized as the heterogeneous and homogeneous elements of society respectively, but adds that the effects of the sacred on the profane change according to the type of society in which they exist (AM, 106). The change occurs with the transition from archaic to industrial society; whereas in archaic society the sacred holds society together by giving direction to the profane realm of production, in industrial society the sacred dissolves society because it disrupts the profane realm of production. Obviously, production is important in both types of society, but the difference between the two societies is the degree to which production characterizes them. In archaic society production has not taken over social relations, so that the sacred is still able to invest production with significance and reveal the social bonds that ground and regulate exchange. In industrial society production so absorbs social relations that the sacred is no longer considered central and now only ruins the smooth processes of production.

Bataille still thinks that the sacred is crucial to community, but he emphasizes its subversive effects rather than its cohesive function in industrial society (AM, 107). When industrial society is homogenized as system of exchange governed by the negotiation of individual interests, the heterogeneous element of the sacred disappears as a central concern,

only to trouble the economic order from the margins.

It seems to me possible to argue that it is in just such a society (or any society with a tendency to reduce itself to homogeneity) that the sacred (or heterogeneous) elements generally acquire a subversive value. . . . If you like, it could crudely be said that what is of a sacred nature founds the social bond in an authentic society, but within an aggregate that is no longer founded on bonding but on personal interest it tends to, on the contrary, towards its destruction. (AM, 108)

According to Bataille, the sacred is a passion which suppresses the separation between isolated individuals, so in an authentic society concerned with communal values, the sacred supports society, while in an industrial society considered as an aggregate of individual interests, the sacred seems to destroy society. The homogeneity in society is not the totality but the equivalence of all elements to the extent that they are valued according to a common measure, while the heterogeneity in a society concerned with the sacred is an element cannot enter into equivalence because it is separate and uncommon.

Bataille finds philosophical support for his concept of community in Nietzsche. Community is not a relation of unity or identity among members, but rather one brought into being and torn asunder at the same time by its tragic sensibility. According to Nietzsche's account in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the tragic is characterized by the tension between Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies—illusions of order and revelations of the truth about life forces, or sober reasoning and ecstatic insight—but both are necessary to sustain a community.<sup>1</sup> A rational order must be given to the insight that ecstatic celebrations make available if it is to become meaningful to the members of a community. Nick Land outlines

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<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), 33.

Nietzsche's notion of the tragic community:

In the *Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche indicates that the issue at the core of the tragic is community. . . . [T]he sense of community at work in [the text] is only superficially commensurable with a thought of ethnic, political, or social unity. Tragic community is not the affirmation of a collective identity, but rather the dissolution of all identifiable traits in an uncircumscribable movement of catastrophe and festival; catastrophe of the individuated self, festival of anonymous flow. . . . This takes the form of the sacrifice of the collectively invested individual; the tragic hero, the prince, God. Its emblem, therefore, is not reverence of the masses (for leader, homeland, culture, race, or creed), but regicide and eruption in the streets.<sup>2</sup>

The celebrations that concern the tragic are a focus for the activities that bring a community together, but the uncontrollable outcome of such activities also threatens it. The fissile character of the binding and tearing in the tragic sensibility signifies that the community is invested with meanings that give it some measure of unity but also challenge it to become something greater. The tragic community is at the edge of itself. It is tragic because it lives with the hope and horror of its simultaneously creative and destructive power. The tragic is a fault at the heart of community, which undermines it despite its achievements. Yet, the tragic community acknowledges the contingency of its social relations and appreciates the importance of maintaining them. While Land correctly claims that the tragic concerns community, he emphasizes the destructive effects over the constructive results, and his one-sided characterization is less helpful for defining Bataille's concept of community.

That Bataille lapses into the same misunderstanding is evident when he interprets Nietzsche as saying that humanity attains the height of its potential only when it recognizes the necessity of community.

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<sup>2</sup>Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism, An Essay in Atheistic Religion* (London: Routledge, 1992), 82.



To live out possibility to the utmost means many will have to change—*taking it on as something outside of them*, no longer depending on any one of them. Nietzsche never doubted that if the possibility he recommended was going to exist, it would require community. Desire for community was constantly on his mind. (N, 8-9)

Bataille thinks that Nietzsche's focus is communal rather than individualistic because individuals should look beyond themselves and contribute to the goals of a community. He even interprets the notorious idea of great individuals as a communal value: "[T]he 'great individuals' . . . meant something only in so far as they constituted a mother-cell of a new whole, of a secondary community, of a recast and rejuvenated society" (AM, 109). Bataille overestimates the communal value of great individuals because Nietzsche actually thought that the recast and rejuvenated society privileges special individuals over all else. There is no doubt that community calls for individuals to compromise or sacrifice their interests to a larger purpose, but it is a misinterpretation to think that Nietzsche is concerned with community. To him, community, usually specified as the herd, is the breeding ground and fodder for an aristocratic elite. Bataille is right that people will have to change to create community, but Nietzsche means that they will have to change their self-conception as bearers of equal rights. There is little that is communal in the sense that gives primacy to communal values over individual interests. Nietzsche's is a dubious formula for the relation of individuals and community, and it is hard to understand how it helps Bataille to develop an adequate concept of community.

Despite problems with Bataille's appeal to Nietzsche, the tragic still points to the significance of the sacred in his concept of community. He writes: "Nothing human necessitates a community of those desiring humanness" (N, 7). This means that community

not only requires the conjunction of individuals' effort for a larger goal, but it also involves a recognition of forces beyond humanity itself. The desire for humanness calls forth a community because we cannot achieve it on our own, but the community that satisfies this desire for humanness is not human but other than human; it is sacred. The community of those who want to be truly human takes them past the limits of humanity to the sacred. The sacred is precisely what is beyond human values, whether individual or communal.

### **3.1.3. The Promise of Secondary Communities**

Having considered Bataille's concept of community in terms the sacred, we are better able to understand what he means by his sometimes mysterious statements about the absence of community. Certainly news of the absence of community had reached philosophers and sociologists earlier than this. While the notion of the absence of community is not itself original, Bataille's account of its characteristics and his analysis of its implications are unique. His interpretation of the notion of the absence of community is crucial to assessing his contribution to political philosophy. His strategy is to take the absence of community as an inevitable situation in and turn it into the community of absence by treating it as a condition for shared social life.

Since community is established through the communifying function of the sacred, Bataille links the absence community to the absence of myth. Doubtless it is a negative experience when we are not in touch with each other because we fail to relate to the whole of life, but it is essential to notice that he gives a positive interpretation of these forms of absence. For example, in an article entitled "The Absence of Myth" (1947) he states: "The

*absence of God* is no longer a closure: it is the opening up to the infinite. The absence of God is greater, and more divine, than God” (AM, 48). In his view, it is not the presence of God, but the absence of God, that leads us to desire the divine. The desire for something begins when it is lacking or lost. In this context he claims that the pervasive presence of myth blinds us to its function, while the absence of myth makes us lucid about its effects. When myth dies the idea of the universe as an ordered whole is lost because it is reduced to a collection of things for our use, but the death of myth reveals precisely that the universe is an ordered whole only if it is mythic (AM, 48).

Bataille indicates the complex character of the absence of myth in a lecture entitled “The Surrealist Religion” (1948), where he claims that the absence of myth is itself a myth—the myth that it is no longer possible to believe in myth:

If we state simply, for the sake of lucidity, that today’s man defines himself by his avidity for myth, and if we add that he defines himself also by the consciousness of not having the power to gain access to the possibility of creating a true myth, we have defined a sort of myth which is the *absence of myth*. . . . No one can say that the absence of myth does not exist as a myth; there is no one who would not be obliged to admit even to the extent that he strives to create a particular myth, to admit the image of the absence of myth as a real myth. (AM, 81)

According to Bataille, we still want myth (avidity for myth), but we think that we are unable to have myth (absence of myth). While one part of us still responds to the comforting certainties provided by myth, another part of us reminds us with disquieting rationality that we are too mature for myth. This combination of avidity and inability produces the paradoxical situation of the myth of an absence of myth. We create the myth that myth is no longer possible, thereby satisfying our avidity for myth and confirming our inability for myth at the same time.

Bataille refers to myth as a form of particularity, by which he means that myth is a meaningful unity of life which provides those who share it a specific way of life. Conversely, he calls the absence of myth “a suppression of particularity,” which would entail either the lack of a specific way of life or at least an unspecified way of life (AM, 81). Myths set limits, giving us a vision of what is possible and impossible. This is the case even when the myth is about the lack of limits, as with the myth of the absence of myth. This is the point at which the myth of the absence of myth is linked to the myth of the absence of community. The myth of the absence of myth (the specific way of life that says ritual is unnecessary in an age of reason) involves the myth of the absence of community (the specific way of life that accepts that more intimate communal relations are unattainable because of rationalization of society). “To this first suppression of particularity [absence of myth] can be added—or must be added—the necessity of an *absence of community*” (AM, 81). The absence of community is the indeterminacy of social life, a loss of a specific form of life for those who do not even consider themselves members of a community. Just as myths are required for social life, the myth of the absence of community also sustains community of absence. We belong together by our belief that there is no community anymore. For Bataille, the absence of community is basis for any community because “the fact that any possible community belongs to what I call . . . absence of community, must be the foundation of possible community” (AM, 81).

Bataille’s thought does not stop at the absence of community because he describes forms of community that might exist: “It would seem that any theory concerned with the various forms that a community can take and with the mutations of communities throughout

history . . . must value the community itself (and the definitive form(s) it will take at the ‘end of history’) over a radical negativity that is in itself unknowable and ungraspable” (VE, xxii). That he values definitive forms of community over the indeterminacy of community becomes clear when he turns his attention to secondary communities. The relation between of the absence of community and the community of absence is represented by the appearance of secondary communities in the community as a whole. The shift in focus to secondary communities signals the move from the absence of community to the community of absence, because secondary communities are a shared experience of being absent from social life. On the one hand, secondary communities are groups that are often outside but sometimes inside community as a whole, and as such they are an absence of community. On the other hand, secondary communities promise a stronger sense of closeness which is missing in the community as a whole, they are a community of absence. The temporary isolation from others is a necessary condition for continuing relations with others.

To Bataille, secondary communities show that membership is tenuous—exclusive and inclusive at the same time. To exist at all, a community must restrict social relations, even when a community is devoted to lifting restrictions on social relations. Bataille advocates this view when he refers to communities concerned with rituals, such as churches.

What in fact does a group signify, if not the opposition of a few men to the mass of other men? For example, what does a church like the Christian Church signify, if not the negation of whatever it is not? There is in the fact that all religion of the past was bound to the necessity of putting itself forward as a church, as a closed community, a sort of fundamental impediment. Any type of religious activity, to the extent that it was an unleashing of passion, tended to suppress the elements that separated people from each other. But at the same time the fusion effected by the ancient festival had for its end only the creation of new individual who could be called the collective individual. (AM, 81)

To Bataille, there are two moments in secondary communities: the closure as a group, and the passionate opening to others and life itself. By maintaining the tension between closure and openness, secondary communities create collective individuals. Individuals are collectivized through relations that seemingly separate them from an actual community, but actually allow them to appreciate the essence of community. The purpose of secondary communities is ritual renew, but not just any secondary community holds this promise. The two types of secondary community—those that seek some sense of communal value, and those that are only an extension of individual interests—are distinguished by the degree to which they are concerned with the sacred or production.<sup>3</sup>

Bataille thinks that the tension between the community as a whole and secondary communities is seen in transition from traditional communities based on geographical or temporal contiguity to elective communities based on conscious choices. He refers to these as two types of belonging: the ‘belonging of fact’ grounded in the brute reality of being born at a particular place and time, and ‘effervescent belonging’ grounded in an individual’s sometimes inconstant commitments.

The category of ‘Bund’—of a secondary community—introduces a final distinction into this list of possibilities of collective life. What Monnerot defines under the name of belonging is, on the whole, the basis of society: it is the community of blood and vicinity. Every society defines bonds of belonging, but such bonds do not always extinguish the desire people have to combine together with those like them in a social bond. Mere belonging is doubtless a significant response to the desire to bind, and the necessity for common action assures it continuance. But occasionally the knot that founds it—whether subjectively, through the acts of the individual, or objectively, in the act of perceptible dissolution—can eventually have only the force of an

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<sup>3</sup>Bataille’s analysis of the closure and openness in secondary communities is likely influenced by Bergson’s *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932).

attenuated attraction. From that point the individual is available, and new aggregates become possible. In the majority of cases the new bond does not involve the renunciation of the first bond: the belonging of fact remains fundamental. I can join the Communist Party, the Freemasons, or some international religious Order, without for a moment ceasing to belong to the French community. If need be, the new bond follows on from a choice taken (as the belonging issues from contiguity) . . . the secondary community needs a commitment and must have recourse to some form of 'creative effervescence' if it is to endure. (AM, 108)

The elasticity of traditional communities enables us to enter into elective communities without destroying traditional communities when elective communities become more important to us. Though the traditional communities into which we are born become less satisfactory as a basis for social life, and we must make conscious choices about the kind of social life we want, these choices have significance in comparison to traditional relations. After all, we are born into a particular family at a particular time and place, no matter how we come to interpret those facts in light of the choices we make later in life.

While it is important to emphasize that the belonging of fact is never entirely supplanted by the effervescent belonging based on choice, Bataille nonetheless thinks that the latter rather than the former signify the true community:

The belonging of fact cannot satisfy us, since it does not allow our relation with other to be founded on what is, according to the choice we make, most important for us. . . . Thus to the extent that we no longer want to be disfigured and ridiculous in our own eyes, we are in search of a secondary community whose aims are in complete accord with our being. (AM, 109)

The erosion of the belonging of fact leaves a space of freedom which we fulfill with the secondary communities that spring from the effervescence of human desires and demands. Once the belonging of fact no longer holds us together, the effervescent belonging which we establish and sustain by our own decisions becomes most important. According to Bataille,

the decline or dangers of communities based on land or blood in the contemporary world, means that “the possibility of secondary communities becomes necessarily, for each of us, the decisive question” (AM, 109). He thinks that the proper development from belonging of fact to effervescent belonging—from communities of contiguity to communities of choice—is demonstrated by the primacy of the sacred. When he earlier refers to the element that is never given but requires commitment and creative effervescence, he means the sacred. That aspect of social life that reflects what is most important to us is the sacred (AM, 109).

Bataille’s anarchistic concept of community goes against the grain of our usual understanding about the nature of social relations. His claim that the most important or promising form of community is elective and effervescent contradicts our intuition that communities reflect the unavoidable facts of people’s lives—where and when they live. Bataille invests secondary communities with special value, especially those devoted to activities concerning the sacred, because they express the essence of community within concrete communities and enable us to see that community is a continually renewed commitment. This is an admirable goal. Yet it is also a lot to expect from secondary communities, since they usually involve looser social relations that one joins or leaves at will or whim, rather than binding social relations based on traditions which are not so easily set aside or abandoned. While communities based on the belonging of fact can become limited or even restrictive compared to the wide range of its members’ aims, communities based on effervescent belonging are not nearly enough to group individuals or and guide their behaviour. Despite the human need for communities to which we choose to belong besides those communities into which we are born and from which we die, they are too weak to



completely fulfill the lives of those who belong to them. Long-standing institutions are required to support community, but Bataille seems to deny this.

Another problem, perhaps paradox, of Bataille's position is also seen in his statement: "Perfect *derangement* (abandon to the absolute absence of limits) is the rule of an *absence of community*" (AM, 96). He uses the term *dérèglement*, which is usually translated as 'deregulation' or 'a lack of rules,' but has connotations of troubling or disruption to put out of order, but also as movement. The absence of community troubles and disrupts communities as well as moves communities to keep open to the other and the outside. Derangement or deregulation is an abandonment to the absence of limits because the lack of rules is the absence of those things that determine the limits of communities. As deranged or deregulated, communities resist closure and remain open to the other and the outside, but they are impossible or uninhabitable as communities. Yet derangement or deregulation is also a passion that suppresses separation between isolated individuals, and it carries the possibility of the spirit of community. Bataille's "perfect derangement" of the absence of community is the oscillating site of the opening and closing of communities. The absence of community, the principle of the lack of rule in social life, is anarchistic. Anarchy troubles actual communities which are determinate and limited form of social life and moves them towards the essence community which is indeterminate and unlimited desire of sociality. However, the anarchism must be limited because order is required to some extent. While anarchy opens things to change and order closes things for stability, complete anarchy is chaos and total order is stagnation. Both together make social life possible, but either one or other make it impossible.

### **3.2. The Problem of Sovereignty**

The idea of sovereignty is the key to Bataille's thought. To him, the nature of individuality and community, as well as the relation between them, is best described by the tension between autonomy and order, independence and interdependence. He takes this as an ontological and political claim; it concerns the structure of existence and the relationship among individuals and communities. Does Bataille contribute anything new to the history of thought about sovereignty? For the most part, he reworks ground covered by those before him, particularly Kant, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche. He thinks that sovereignty is a conjunction of autonomy and authority, will and law, or self-rule. This applies to individuals and communities alike; an individual is sovereign insofar as he or she is autonomous, and a community is sovereign to the extent that it has the authority over individuals needed to maintain its own order. In each case, freedom must limit itself to be legitimate. To him, sovereignty maintains itself as a desire for independence from limits that are enforced but not chosen. Sovereign beings are able to choose their limits, not escape them altogether; instead, they actively legislate for themselves. Bataille considers sovereignty as a relation between freedom and order.

#### **3.2.1. The Interrelation of Freedom and Order**

There are two issues in Bataille's idea of sovereignty: whether the relation between freedom and order is achieved by idealism or materialism, and whether the best route to materialism is communism or surrealism. To him, there is no doubt that the ideal realm and the material realm are related; the debate is whether that relation is top down or bottom up.

He rejects idealism in favour of materialism, because he thinks that the former tends to totalitarianism in its attempt to impose order from above, while the latter realizes that order must emerge from the concrete conditions of human life. Once this issue is settled, the question turns to whether the materialist basis of autonomy and authority is found in 'engagement' with politics or the 'irresponsibility' of aesthetics. The debate about sovereignty is specifically cast in his thought as a life-long struggle between materialistic responses to Hegel's idealism—represented by the political practices of communism and surrealism as well as the philosophies of Marx and Nietzsche.<sup>4</sup>

These tensions are present as early as his essay "The 'Old Mole' and the Prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* [Superman] and *Surrealist*" (1929-30), which uses the difference between the metaphors of the imperialistic eagle and the communist 'old mole' to distinguish idealist and materialist revolutionaries:

Politically, the eagle is identified with imperialism, that is, with the unconstrained development of individual authoritarian power, triumphant over all obstacles.... Revolutionary idealism tends to make of the revolution an eagle above eagles, a *supereagle* striking down authoritarian imperialism, an idea as radiant as an adolescent eloquently seizing power for the benefit of utopian enlightenment. This detour naturally leads to the failure of the revolution and, with the help of military fascism, the satisfaction of the elevated need for idealism. . . . Meanwhile, brought back to the subterranean action of economic facts, the 'old mole' revolution hollows out chambers in a decomposed soil repugnant to the delicate nose of the utopians. 'Old mole,' Marx's resounding expression for the complete satisfaction of the revolutionary outburst of the masses, must be understood in relation to the notion of a geological uprising as expressed in the *Communist Manifesto*.

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<sup>4</sup>Jean-Michel Besnier claims that while Bataille is torn between Hegel and Nietzsche, he moves from the former to the latter to escape the emphasis on the state and envision sovereignty as a refusal of subjugation. This allows him avoid the duplicity of petty politics in favour of a politics up to the tragic standards of life. See "Georges Bataille in the 1930s: A Politics of the Impossible," *On Bataille: Yale French Studies* 78 (1990), 169-180.

Marx's point of departure has nothing to do with the heavens, preferred station of the imperialist eagle as of Christian or revolutionary utopians. He begins in the bowels of the earth, as in the materialist bowels of proletarians. (VE, 34-35)

Bataille thinks that idealists are at best utopian and at worst imperialistic. On his view, idealism is doomed to be ineffective because it has no sense of the concrete conditions of life, and it is dangerous because it tends to be totalitarian by seeking a higher authority that becomes repressive. To him, however, true materialism is hard to develop. He considers communism important because it has a materialist basis and emphasizes mass-based revolutions, but it is not certain that it avoids idealism, insofar as the activities of the proletariat are co-opted to the elevated values of the bourgeoisie, and it is not necessarily the case that it avoids totalitarianism, since leaders could control revolutions initiated and inspired by the masses (VE, 36). He is also ambivalent about whether surrealism is idealistic or materialistic. He criticizes the "surrealist revolution" because it is initially isolated from the masses, calling it "the childhood disease of this base materialism," but then claims that it later accepts the legitimacy of communism's principles and adopts the effectiveness of communism's organization in pursuit of freedom in the world (VE, 32-33).

Bataille's view poses problems with respect to political philosophy. He thinks that the elimination of recognition and respect is necessary to overcome conservative idealism, not with crass infantile materialism but with subversive mature materialism (VE, 43). This seems in contradiction with his goals. For example, we cannot eliminate recognition, because if the masses are to become class-conscious and seek emancipation, they must recognize themselves and others as members of an oppressed class. It is also not clear why we would want to eliminate respect, especially since respect for the natural creativity and sociability

of human beings inspires their emancipation from the constrictive and alienating system of capitalism. This suggests that Bataille's materialism is stuck in the immaturity of surrealism, a youthful egotism that does not take into account others. If his idea of sovereignty is the autonomous authority that neglects others, then it is no condition for social life.

It is indicative of how unresolved the issue of sovereignty is in Bataille's thought when he returns to the materialist subversion of idealism in the third volume of *The Accursed Share*, entitled *Sovereignty* (1949). He still thinks that there are two options for a materialist notion of freedom and order in contemporary society: Marx's rejection of the sovereign subject as a ideology by reducing it to an object in the movement of revolution, and Nietzsche's restoration of the sovereign subject by releasing it from the facts of the past and present to create new values for the future (S, 368). The former says that the sovereignty of the subject must be overthrown in the interests of the emancipation of humanity, but the later says that without sovereign subjectivity the emancipation of humanity is an empty victory:

The communists are opposed to what seems sovereign to them. But for Nietzsche, a world deprived of what I call sovereign would be no longer bearable. With respect to traditional sovereignty, he had the same attitude as the communists. But he could not accept a world in which man—in which each man—would be a means and not the end of some common endeavor.  
(S, 367)

The 'traditional sovereignty' which Bataille thinks that both Marx and Nietzsche resist is an alienating order over humanity, such as Church or State. For both of them, sovereignty is the freedom to control rather than be controlled by material conditions of life.

However, once humanity achieves sovereignty over material conditions, Bataille thinks that Marx and Nietzsche disagree about what human freedom implies about a higher order. He seems to stand against the former and with the later when he denies that human

freedom means that there is nothing sovereign at all and insists that there are values irreducible to the freedom of humanity (S, 380). He thinks that a higher order is an inescapable feature of life if human beings are to be free from becoming merely things with use, and that the question is not whether that order is judicious in human terms but whether humanity serves it or it serves humanity (S, 385). Sovereignty is not a characteristic of humanity but of life itself; we are alienated from life if we posit our superiority over and separation from whatever resists our desires and designs, and emancipated by it if we reject our superiority to establish a connection with all that exists. This is the sense of Bataille's statement: "'I am NOTHING': this parody of affirmation is the last word of sovereign subjectivity, freed from the dominion it wanted—or had—to give itself over things" (S, 421). Humanity has the power to will its own powerlessness. By experiencing the limit of our ability and the lack of our utility, we escape the world of objects which we have created and with which we measure our worth. Yet the abdication of sovereignty is not servile; it is chosen by us and not imposed upon us. Sovereignty is a formula for freely limiting ourselves to attain unity with others and the world.

The tension in sovereignty between autonomy and authority signifies that human freedom is not absolutely autonomous, but relative to a higher order, though it is one humanity gives itself.

No serious and sustained objection can be made against the need to give everyone's activity rules that limit it and place it in the service of good. So we are faced with a dilemma: we are adults [*majeurs*], we actually overthrow the established order, but we cannot intend to put freedom in the place of constraint, we have to impose some new constraint, less burdensome perhaps, but a constraint such that society as a whole does not cease to acknowledge the primacy of useful activity. . . . Only rebellion gives access to the unjustifiable disorder whose meaning is in not being compatible with the law.

But, like the crowds, rebellion is childish. Lucid revolution submits to the necessity whose empire blind rebellion denies. (S, 407)

While he criticizes blind rebellion as unjustifiable disorder and accepts lucid revolution which accedes to the necessity of order, this can apply to Marx's dialectic of history and Nietzsche's order of rank. He refers to "revolutionaries, who, if they overthrow the established order, have the responsibility of establishing a new order, a better one no doubt, but an order nonetheless" (S, 407). The question remains whether he thinks that these revolutionaries of a new order are Marx's proletariat or Nietzsche's aristocrats. He does not make a clear choice, and when he unites them, we well wonder what a communist superman would look like—an anarchist, I suspect.

### **3.2.2. The Sacred Against the State**

The difficulty in understanding Bataille's idea of sovereignty stems from the fact that there are two types of sovereignty to which he repeatedly appeals but rarely distinguishes. I call them 'state sovereignty,' which is an authority related to human interests and needs, and 'sacred sovereignty,' which is an authority outside of all human interests and needs. He thinks that state sovereignty is effective to the extent it adopts or participates in sacred sovereignty, which in turn requires states to invent or revive sacred rituals. The idea of the relation of the state and the sacred is his most important contribution to the history of sovereignty, though it also raises serious problems. Bataille transplants sovereignty from the soil of the state into the atmosphere of the sacred, though this does not mean it becomes a theological concept. Instead, sovereignty involves a vision of existence which would overcome the servitude to economic functions and the isolation of atomistic individualism.

This requires the communifying activity of myth. The issue is whether and how mythic community is expressed in political principles. Bataille writes at the time when it is thought that the prevalent alternatives to the ills of capitalism and individualism—associated, rightly or wrongly, with democracy—are communism and fascism. Dismissive of democracy due to its perceived role in perpetuating the crisis, he struggles between various forms of communism and fascism that place importance on myth, but he is also averse to communism and fascism insofar as they ignore the sacred. Bataille is interested in experiencing the sacred through myth as an alternative to the three rival versions of state sovereignty, but if he thinks that democracy is doomed, then the choice between the tyranny of fascism and the bureaucratization of communism is no choice for him at all (VE, 261).

Bataille's attitude to the three rival versions of state sovereignty is difficult to define, but he judges them all against sacred sovereignty. "The Sacred Conspiracy" (1936) is a search for something other than profane politics, outside the limits of humanity, which is found in the dimension of the sacred. Here he argues that petty politics is superseded by the sacred, whether it is interpreted as the crudity of crime (Sade), the transcendence of God (Kierkegaard) or the unknown future of humanity (Marx). To Bataille, then, true revolution is not political but apolitical. In other words, revolution is sacred or superhuman—"WE ARE FEROCIOUSLY RELIGIOUS" (VE, 179). Yet this sense of religiosity is distinct from religion as an instrument of social cohesion. The sacred unleashes insubordination by freeing the forces of life from their servility to political interests. Bataille therefore encourages things that are purposeless, meaning that it is not useful or utilitarian, and that it is not servile to other interests. With Nietzsche, he wants to release humanity from having to be the head of



the universe, from serving as the crowning achievement of the universe. “Human life is exhausted from serving as the head of, or the reason for, the universe. To the extent that it becomes this head and this reason, to the extent that it becomes necessary to the universe, it accepts servitude” (VE, 180).

That Bataille does not think of sacred sovereignty as a return to theological politics is demonstrated in “Propositions” (1937), where he criticizes the three rival versions of state sovereignty because they are too theological, and advances an atheological interpretation of sacred sovereignty. He is opposed to politics that reduces the forces of life to the function of one head, ultimately the eternal God, and proposes an acephalous or headless community after the death of God (VE, 199). He thinks that political movements, no matter how diverse the motivations of crisis, all lead to unitary or closed communities rather than universal or open communities. If life itself lacks unity, then the universal community without unity is only achieved after the death of God. “The search for God, for the absence of movement, for *tranquility*, is the fear that scuttled all attempts at a universal community” (VE, 201).

I take Bataille’s emphasis of sacred sovereignty over state sovereignty as an anarchist argument. He advances an anarchistic concept of community insofar as sovereignty is not so much a matter of law, the right to frame and enforce rules, but an experience of what is outside law and opposed to all social orders. Anarchy is an aspect of those activities devoted to the sacred and unproductive expenditure. To Bataille, sovereignty is the lack of servility, which he means in the widest sense as a freedom from functionality. His philosophy typically promotes things with no obvious value. Anarchy is an absence of usefulness, and anarchism is against the principle of utility. He develops an anarchistic approach under the

heading of heterology, which he defines as a study of those things that are radically other or incommensurable, specifically the unproductive expenditure outside the orders of production. Anarchism, then, is freedom from values, including humanity and humanistic politics.

Bataille demonstrates the paradox of the anarchistic approach in “The Use Value of D. A. F. De Sade” (1929-1930), which shows how what is apparently valueless is actually valuable. He states that the division of social facts onto those that are profane (including law, politics and commerce) and those that are religious (involving activities directed to the sacred) is based on the distinction between two forces of life, the homogeneity of appropriation and the heterogeneity of waste (VE, 94). Activities tend to resolve into the homogeneous order of appropriation despite the scandal of the heterogeneous elements of waste; heterology counteracts this tendency. Activities with a useful function are often motivated by unproductive expenditure, which could undermine the social order if left to themselves, but unregulated forces are usually turned into political principles. In other words, even revolution becomes functional through the gradual development of freedom (VE, 100). Bataille seeks to isolate and sustain the anarchistic aspect of revolution that is not reduced to the aims of revolution or appropriated into another order. For him, this means that the humanist value of freedom limits revolutionary forces. He seems to suggest that humanity is fully free when it is released finally from the goal of human freedom (VE, 101).

The value of the valueless is also the theme of “The Notion of Expenditure” (1933). While acknowledging the need for organized accumulation and conservation, he stresses the importance of unproductive expenditure and irrecoverable loss (VE, 118). He provides

examples of activities that are similar to the potlatch practiced in primitive societies, where they lavish evermore expensive gifts on others to symbolize their power in relation to their neighbors and their superiority in relation to the necessities of life. He thinks that potlatch is still present in both the conspicuous consumption of the bourgeoisie and the energy expended by the proletariat (VE, 122-125). The anarchist aspect of unproductive expenditure, insofar as it is against or outside the law, is apparent at the point where Bataille states: "Human life, distinct from juridical existence . . . cannot be limited to closed systems assigned to it by rational conceptions" (VE, 128). It is impossible to control the excessive energy of existence according to the laws of equal exchange in society. The restricted or conservative economy of society is undermined by the general or wasteful economy of life itself. Society necessarily ascribes utilitarian ends to life, though life itself serves no purpose and there is only relative value to the notion of utility. He uses the term 'insubordination' to characterize the material facts that are not in the service of anything else. The material facts themselves are insubordinate to the human ends to which we put them. He speculates that humans ensure themselves the necessities of life, not because this function is sufficient in itself, but because they ultimately want to engage in "the insubordinate function of free expenditure" or seek the time and resources needed for the wasteful activities that mean more to them (VE, 129).

Bataille's focus on unproductive over productive activity and refusal of humanist interpretation of life are behind his disagreement with communists, who think that we must work within history for the progress of human freedom, and his disillusionment with communism, especially Stalinism. His argument for anarchism against communism, or an

anarchistic communism, is seen in his speech “Popular Front in the Street” (1935). The central theme is anti-representationalism, succinctly expressed in the opening phrase: “We are not politicians” (VE, 161). He tries to retrieve the spirit of the people from the party professionals who want a monopoly on revolution. Throughout his speech he distinguishes between the violent drives of the people and the careful calculations of politicians, the effective force of protests in the street and the ineffective finesse of party professionals:

We are led to make an essential distinction between the reactions that agitate men in the street and the phrasemongering of politicians . . . this distinction credits the men who have nothing going for them but their passions, to the detriment of those corrupted and often emptied of human content by the strategic task. (VE, 166)

To Bataille, what is particularly surprising is that the supposedly militant revolutionaries either lack faith in the spontaneous reactions of the people or confuse the actual protests in the street with their own political platforms. Their need to organize robs revolution of the very resources it requires to overthrow oppressive orders, namely, expressions of enthusiasm. “It is evident that if, in general, insurrections had had to wait for learned disputes between committees and the political offices of parties, then there never would have been an insurrection” (VE, 162). Instead, he thinks that through the power of emotional outbursts the people break from domination under those who claim to liberate them but lead them to other oppressions. He states that the reality of street protest pits life itself against both social systems and isolated individuals (VE, 164). Bataille’s recovery of the people’s spirit from party professionals reveals something about his own motivations. He suggests that communism become anarchistic, if it is to be effective in overthrowing the oppressive orders, including that tendency within itself. Here he makes the most typically

anarchist statement that the party and its representatives, even when we agree with them, must be dissolved to release and realize the potential of community action. “It is clear from now on that, in order to have confidence in its own resources, the Popular Front must first lose the confidence it currently has in its principal leaders” (VE, 166).

Bataille is not completely anarchist because he is not opposed to political parties if they are controlled by the people rather than people controlled by them. “We do not believe that organized parties should disappear, but we do not believe either that the masses can attain the power to put an end to domination by capitalist lackeys unless a movement appears that can escape the sterilizing control of these parties” (VE, 165). The revolution cannot do entirely without leaders or without a theoretically articulated strategy. His anarchism is directed at the party professionals in an effort to free revolution from its domination, so that its leadership and intellectual underpinnings can come from the people themselves.

We are as far as we can be from the belief that a movement can do without its leaders, as far as we can be from the belief that this leadership can do without the resources of human knowledge contributed by the most recent advances of human understanding. But first of all we must protest against everything that is born in the poisoned atmosphere of professional congresses and committees, all of which are at the mercy of hallway maneuvers. (VE, 162)

His stress on the reality of the street is not a matter of ending debates on important political questions, though he thinks that these debates should happen on the street where emotions overrun reasoned arguments. While it is good for debate to occur outside the defenses of old political positions, “we would not want to suggest that we blindly abandon ourselves to the spontaneous reactions of the street” (VE, 166).

Bataille’s critics claim that his disillusionment with communism strengthens his

temptation to fascism, and there are reasons to think they are right when we consider one of his most significant essays, “The Psychological Structure of Fascism” (1933). He starts with the distinction between homogenous and heterogenous aspects of society, or productive activity governed by rules and valued according to a common measure, and excessive expenditure concerning the sacred that have an obligatory quality outside of regulated relations. A community lives uneasily an element that strengthen and weaken it; lawlessness or something above law is required for laws to have force (VE, 138). While social order arises spontaneously as production is organized, it is precarious and must be protected from unruly forces, which requires another imperative element that assimilates or eliminates those unruly forces. The State is not itself that imperative element, but it borrows its obligatory force from heterogenous agencies outside of the homogenous realm of production, such as military or religious orders, who in turn rely on the State to represent and protect them. The State thereby becomes the intermediary between homogeneity and heterogeneity. They try to preserve a homogeneous social order on the basis of a heterogenous order, by establishing state sovereignty through an appeal to sacred sovereignty. The State shuttles between adaptation and authority; where compromise is possible differences are reduced through adaptation, but what is not accommodated is eliminated by authority, and depending on whether social order is achieved by adaptation or authority, the State is democratic or despotic (VE, 139).

According to Bataille, insofar as heterology can characterize the homogenous State, by being an obligatory organization that successfully establishes social order through an appeal to the sacred, fascism is the best form, because it is most in touch with heterogeneity

in fashioning homogeneity: “Heterogenous fascist action belongs to the entire set of higher forms. It makes an appeal to sentiments traditionally defined as *exalted* and *noble* and tends to constitute an authority as an unconditional principle, situated above any utilitarian judgement” (VE, 145). He does not consider this an endorsement fascist states, but claims to describe the essence of fascism. To him, fascism is a form of sacred sovereignty opposed to state sovereignty, insofar as the state is something to be overcome or only a means to an end (VE, 153). He criticizes fascism for limiting itself by relying on the state rather than the sacred as a framework for organic organization to the extent that the primacy of the state leads to the position that nothing else is sacred. Comparing Italian and German fascism, he finds that former reduces the sacred to the State and unifies the people under the authority of the leader’s personality, while in the later racial values supplant the State in which authority refuses to articulate itself coherently. His stunning conclusion is that the essence of fascism has no need for a theory of the State (VE, 155).

It is fairly clear that Bataille is critical the fact that fascist states betray the effervescence of existence, but is not at all clear why he would want to retain the term ‘fascism’ for his peculiar form of sacred sovereignty without state sovereignty when it is so loaded with other interpretations, some of which are against his intentions. However, if focus rests on the heterology of the sacred, his essay can be considered as an anarchist argument that the State is not itself an imperative power but derived from another imperative power, and that the State would be redundant if we could directly access that imperative power. Ultimately, no form of political organization satisfies him, since the sacred is not in the service of states but only lends its effects to them. The heterological quality of sacred is

anarchist insofar as it is irreducible to the political interests of the State.

Bataille's anarchism signals his resistance to fascism. In "Nietzsche and the Fascists" (1937) he widens the gulf between Nietzsche and fascism on the grounds that Nietzsche's interest is not the myth of the past that limit the state to petty politics but the myth of the future that frees "stateless ones" for greater endeavors (VE, 192-193). In "Nietzschean Chronicle" (1937), he similarly states that fascism is incomplete to the extent that it is a nostalgia for the recovery of a community beyond each individual life that results in nothing but military discipline and social calm produced by eliminating all antagonisms. To him, "brief bursts of fascism" cannot form a community without alienating life forces; they are always limited to state sovereignty under one ruler rather than the sacred sovereignty of the life forces without rule (VE, 204). The political celebration of death in the protection of fatherland as crucial to community is a limited goal in relation to the tragic truth that stirs humanity towards true community. He seeks instead a community without a head or leader—an acephalous community (VE, 207). Yet this community would not be without authority altogether because it would be centered on sacred sovereignty, though it is adverse to political interests.

Not only does a politician, of whatever party, find repugnant the consideration of profound realities, but he has accepted . . . the game of alterations and compromises that makes possible precarious power alliances, and that makes impossible the formation of a true heartfelt community. (VE, 209)

Bataille's anti-politician attitude is an argument for anarchist community insofar as he claims that humanity can escape representation by the state and appeal to the higher order of existence outside social laws, and thereby make available to themselves the spontaneous



solidarity that is the real mark of community.

In “Propositions” (1937) Bataille’s strongest attacks are reserved for democracy. While it is not the only social order under one head or leader, to him, democracy is worst form of political organization, because it atrophies heterogeneity under homogeneity. The stability of democracy stifles but does not stop the forces of life; the equality of individuals is the most temporary protest against the unbalanced and uncontrollable forces of life. It is the unlikeliest place for revolution, because it neutralizes antagonisms and excludes the explosive condensation needed for revolution. It does not have the resources to free humanity, and therefore it must be superseded for human freedom to exist. Bataille thinks that resistance to heads or leaders comes from without rather than within democracy, because the protest against unitarism cannot arise in a unitary community; rather, “the possibilities of human existence can from now on be situated *beyond* the formation of *monocephalic* societies” (VE, 198). To Bataille, the homogeneity of monocephalic society is the natural and necessary result of the play of life forces that make human existence possible, but it also stops the play of life forces and restricts the possibilities of human existence. He thinks that the heterogeneity of bi-cephalic or poly-cephalic social order is required (VE, 199). However, bi-cephalic or poly-cephalic societies are a-cephalic societies, or on the way towards it, because they resist unification under one head; the tension between many heads could lead to headlessness. It is strange that Bataille thinks that democracy is a social order under one head rather than the multi-headed or even headless social order that allows for anarchistic action. Where there is antagonism, as in democracy, anarchy is also possible.

Bataille does not suggest that an entirely headless society is possible or desirable. The

movement outside of unitary social order is anarchistic, but it is not total because there is some social order; the key difference is that anarchistic social order is not unitary. As with the other theorists, he thinks that all revolutionary movements, including anarchism, usually involve social order of some sort to give institutional permanence to the newly won freedoms.

But it would be crude error to imagine that the exclusive, and even simply the necessary, goal of an explosive thrust is to destroy the head and the unitary structure of society. The formation of a new structure, of an ‘order’ developing and raging across the entire earth, is the only truly liberating act, and the only one possible, since revolutionary destruction is regularly followed by the reconstitution of the social structure and its head. (VE, 198-199)

We are not really free when we are outside all social order and we cannot express or experience our freedom without creating a social order that shapes our freedom. The order he has in mind is one that is not unitary or centralized but diverse and diffuse. To him, revolution is a force of life that does not depend on political positions but is accessible to everyone and challenges those who want to control it. “Revolution, in its significant historical existence, which still dominates the present civilization, manifests itself to the eyes of a world mute with fear as the sudden explosion of limitless riots” (VE, 200). Revolution aims at a universal community, but it cannot achieve this as long as it rests with a few. For this to occur, the heads of leaders must roll—monarchs, party professionals and God—because they sustain the stability inimical to creation of a new order (VE, 201).

Bataille’s anarchistic ambivalence towards communism, fascism and democracy is unnecessarily caused by his overemphasis of the sacred. If, as he suggests, communism is doomed by its indifference to ritual, but fascism is attractive because it adapts rituals to

modern life, then fascism should be successful and communism should fail. Yet communism has lasted longer than fascism. This is because communism is not without rituals, as witnessed by the ceremonies and commemorations that strengthen solidarity and reaffirm commitment to human emancipation. If the communal quality of rituals is his ideal, then he could easily embrace communism. However, his concern with the sacred shows three themes that link it to the fascism emerging at the time: the vision of the totality of existence, the desire to control the destiny of humanity and the importance of ritual recreations. Furthermore, when we consider the anti-democratic results of his focus on sacred we well wonder if it is worth the political price to renew it.

A more general and perhaps pervasive problem than Bataille's relation to communism, fascism and democracy is the extent to which his interest in the sacred and anarchism precludes engagement in political life and leads to withdrawal into aesthetics. While there is evidence to support this criticism, to say that he rejects politics outright is to miss the significance of aesthetics to him. Bataille responds to an open letter from Rene Char asking about the incompatibilities between politics and poetry by questioning the simplistic assumption of the notion of engagement with or against the state in order to raise the possibility of an activity devoted to the excessive experience of the sacred. He considers necessary the split between useful and useless activity; while one results in a negative morality of limitations, the other produces a positive morality of limitlessness, but both are required (LRC, 36). The writer is caught between two options, thunderous platitudes or silent insights, though the choice is not always exclusive. The interests of social utility often oppose authentic truth, yet this opposition is compromised in times of crisis (LRC, 38). The

separation of sovereignty into its state and sacred forms, temporal and spiritual orders, is what makes both of them possible; that is, the state legitimates itself on the basis of the sacred, and the sacred is legitimized insofar as it is incorporated into the state (LRC, 41). He says that the history of sovereignty is the ascendancy of the sacred sovereignty over the state sovereignty. He thinks that if the writer acts at all, he or she acts for an authority beyond any temporal order (LRC, 42).

Bataille's anarchistic idea of sovereignty brings to light an ambiguity in his thought. Sovereignty is about the relation of individuals and community, autonomy and authority, though this relation raises questions. What autonomy does an individual have in community? What authority should be obeyed by an individual in community? Humanity is in tension between a desire to escape the communal conditions of life and an inability to transcend community, the extremes of solitude and servitude. Humans must try to achieve autonomy from community to avoid servitude and accept the authority of community to overcome their solitude. Both those who are absolutely autonomous with no communal life and those whom authority makes functionaries of community have equally lost their humanity. To Bataille, sovereignty is the solution to this dilemma, but to the extent that neither independence nor membership are total, sovereignty remains unresolvable in principle. This is valuable in reminding us that the relationship between individual freedom and communal order is constantly under negotiation, but we must content ourselves with the fact that he simply points out what is at stake in community troubled by the problem of sovereignty.

We have seen two types of community in Bataille's thought—traditional and elective; and accordingly, two types of sovereignty—state and sacred. To the extent that there is a

tension between these two types of community and two types of sovereignty, the question about what law should be obeyed remains unresolved. An individual is free insofar as he or she follows a law, but state sovereignty would have that law be one of an actual community, whereas sacred sovereignty would have that law be one of the essence of community. The anarchistic character of sacred sovereignty that resists reduction to state sovereignty emphasizes the importance of the individual over any actual community but not the essence of community. Anarchism means that the individual destroys any actual community only in the search for the essence of community. While we are free to be outside any actual community, we are not free not to belong to essence of community.

## CHAPTER 4

### BLANCHOT: THE UNAVOWABLE COMMUNITY AND THE CONDITION OF NEUTRALITY

“Community life?” said the orderly. “Everyone lives all together here, but there’s no community life.

— Maurice Blanchot, “The Idyll”

#### 4.0. Introduction

There are two concepts of community in Blanchot’s thought, corresponding to different periods of his life. His first concept of community is based on national identity, cultural similarities, shared language and land. Throughout the 1930s he intimated this in journalistic articles and literary criticism for vehicles of the ‘New Right,’ such as *Le Rempart*, *Combat*, *L’Insurgé* and *Journal des Débats*. During this decade he was a severe critic of whatever weakened the precarious position of France following World War I: the aim of world-wide revolution in the Popular Front that sympathized with Stalin, the toothless internationalism of the League of Nations which would not halt Hitler, and interminable parliamentary procedures at home and abroad. It is more appropriate to say that at this time he had a notion of ‘country’ or considered community in relation to national interests. His views were conservative, but whether they were fascistic, as has been charged, is not clear. Yet they can be considered also as anarchistic arguments against the state and the corruption of politics. After World War II, Blanchot despaired of politics and developed

a literary theory and fictional style that widened the distance between engagement in the political sphere and the idleness of literature. In this context, his second concept of community becomes increasingly important. He provides three examples of community—the people, the couple and friends (public, private and mixed)—to demonstrate its distinction from the state and civil society. In each case, human relations resist determination. This is central to his anarchistic approach to the concept of community. He appeals to the notion of neutrality, meaning both the excess of existence that cannot be comprehended philosophically and a power that cannot be co-opted politically. An anarchists' cynical conception of power as repressive lies behind his insistence on neutrality and his notion of passive responsibility. That is, he offers only the two options of refusing the power of ruling orders and refraining from using power oneself. Blanchot's thought reveals the limits of anarchism insofar as it is critical of existing structures but not creative of alternatives.

#### **4.1. From the Failure of Communism to the Finitude of Community**

The obvious beginning for an account of Blanchot's concept of community is *The Unavowable Community* (1983). He thinks that the problem of community is not simply the loss of community, which he sees as a myth of absence, but the accompanying loss of our ability to understand community at all, which comes from following the wrong ways of understanding it. He thinks that establishing and sustaining community has never been needed more urgently, but the urgency becomes more acute when we are unable even to understand what community is (UC, 1). The title points indicates that the issue for him is not the existence of community but the expression of community. At the end of 60 pages he

questions our ability to say anything about it:

*The unavowable community*: does that mean that it does not acknowledge itself or that it is such that no avowal may reveal it, given that each time we have talked about its way of being, one has had the feeling that one grasped only what makes it exist by default? So would it have been better to have remained silent? (UC, 56)

We get the feeling that he prefers to remain silent, but urgency drives him to expression, though it is not clear whether he thinks that community cannot be expressed, is sullied by being expressed, or simply does not exist outside of expressions. To him, community is unavowable in practice, because we fail to express it properly, and in principle, because we could never express it properly. The essence of community is not captured by what members or observers say about it. The best lesson that can be learned from his paradoxical position is a warning not to idolize concepts of community. Yet this leaves unresolved the problem of why he says anything about it and what the status of a text is that says it has said nothing about it. How are we to know what community is?

Blanchot's thought should be considered in light of the failure of communism and the dangers of lapsing into the two temptations of totalitarianism and individualism. For him, the events of May '68 first raised and then crushed the hopes of a post-war revolution. At that time the Communist Party of France joined the ruling government of Charles de Gaulle in suppressing the general strike of students, intellectuals and workers, allegedly because it was not under the control of the party leaders. This revealed the limits of the supposedly emancipatory and egalitarian movement of communism. He thinks that the inability of communist leaders to accept the new communities created at that time was the result of at least two faults inherent in communism. The first fault is its tendency to totalitarianism in



attempting to establish liberty and equality through the unity of humanity which recognizes no other hierarchy. These goals should be forsaken if they require accepting some sense of a communitarian human nature which we are supposed to share. Communism tends towards totalitarianism when it treats humanity as a totality of work to be undertaken, from which nothing is excluded or excepted (UC, 2). The second fault is that the communist notions of liberty and equality lead to individualism insofar as there are no limits to the inalienable rights of individuals who appear to each other as absolute realities or values. This is how revolution spawns the terror of the majority. However, when we question the idea of individuals as bearers of rights we will be able to think of community differently from the democratic focus on reciprocity and recognition. If we persist in using the term ‘community,’ we must realize that it refers either to the asymmetry of obligations between its members, or the absence of a complete communion of its members (UC, 3).

To Blanchot, both problems with communism—its lapse into totalitarianism and individualism, expressed in improper conceptions of liberty and equality—are rooted in its aim of immanence, which is an improper conception of fraternity. He thinks that there is something about community that resists any immanent totality of humanity; this excessive element is transcendence. He thinks of transcendence as the condition in which incomplete beings reach outside themselves in relation to others, but the community that they form does not compose a whole or compensate for a lack, but highlights their incompleteness:

A being does not want to be recognized, it wants to be contested: in order to exist it goes towards the other, which contests and at times negates it, so as to start being only in that privation that makes it conscious (here lies the origin of consciousness) of the impossibility of being itself, of subsisting as its *ipse* or . . . as itself as a separate individual. (UC, 6)

Blanchot thinks that community does not answer but raises the question of existence for each being. The question of existence is precisely the issue of solipsism. The origin of one's individuality is one's privation in relation to others; one becomes conscious that one is not the entire world but is something limited (UC, 8). The point is that the self is not unified but split. There is transcendence and difference at the heart of immanence and identity. Blanchot considers the relation of one to the other as a contest, but why is it not that one realizes one's limits as an isolated individual through accepting the aid of another? This issue is not too troubling because we could adopt a less aggressive interpretation of our relation to others without losing the gist of it, such as Levinas' notion of 'welcome' as the call of conscience that challenges my self-sufficient freedom (TI, 100).

Since community comes from the realization that one is limited in relation to others, it is a finite community that emphasizes the finitude of each being. Blanchot states: "The existence of every being thus summons the other or a plurality of others. . . . It therefore summons a community: a *finite* community, for it in turn has its principle in the *finitude* of the beings which form it and which would not tolerate that it (the community) forget to carry the *finitude* constituting those beings to a higher tension" (UC, 6). He warns against thinking of finite community as an organization that has a reality beyond its members. Such an organization either totally determine the lives of its members or have nothing to do with the lives of its members; it is either too full or too empty. On the one hand, he says "the community should not entrance itself, nor should it dissolve its constituent members into a heightened unity which would suppress itself at the same time that it would annul itself as community" (UC, 8). On the other hand, he says: "It does not follow, however, that the

community is the simple putting in common . . . of a shared will to be several, albeit to do nothing, that is to say, to do nothing else than maintain the sharing of ‘something’ which, precisely, seems always already to have eluded the possibility of being considered as part of a sharing” (UC, 8). To him, community is not a fusion or fascination that goes beyond the finite beings who comprise it, nor an inert container for diverse and indifferent elements. The former is the totalitarianism in which individuals are sacrificed to the whole, and the latter is the individualism in a structure which sees only that everyone pursues their interest without interfering with others. Both these are ruled out by finite community—totalitarianism because the finitude of each being cannot be worked into a finished totality, individualism because what is shared is not just a procedure for balancing claims but a feature of every finite being.

Finitude means that community is possible and impossible at the same time. Finitude is demonstrated by the utter uniqueness but banality of each birth and death. It is not one’s awareness of being born and dying, but one’s witness to another’s birth and death, that puts existence into question as a community. Finite community is formed from what we cannot experience alone but can only experience together. “There could not be a community without the sharing of that first and last event which in everyone ceases to be able to be just that (birth, death)” (UC, 9). In this sense, birth and death are only our own, and everyone’s in common. We do not experience the first and last events of our finite life except through others; they are no one else’s birth and death, though they are shared by others. All individuals and the communities to which they belong exist as this ‘share’—the term Blanchot borrows from Nancy to denote that existence is distributed through every being and

divided uniquely as each being.

Blanchot emphasizes that the sharing of finitude, birth and death, does not mean that community is a kind of infinitude, insofar as it surpasses any birth and death (UC, 10). Community is neither an infinite number of finite beings, nor a reaching to the infinite of finite beings; it does not extend our limits, but marks our limits. Finitude is the basis of our experience of community, and community enables us to experience our finitude. Finitude is not the essence of humanity or community; the limit at the heart of beings rules out the formation of a infinity of humanity or community (UC, 11). The focus on finitude means that community is neither the place of complete immanence with others nor the complete transcendence of a larger order. There is some immanence because individuals are brought together in community, though it is not communion, because it is troubled by transcendence to the extent that both individuals and community are moved towards what is other and outside them, though this transcendence does not take individuals or community into an absolute being such as the totality of humanity or divinity.

Blanchot thinks that the basis of community is having nothing in common; the essence of community is its non-essentiality. He seeks the community which forms when we refrain from gathering around a common quality and focus on finitude as the limit to communism. He states: "Two essential traits emerge at this stage of the reflection: 1) the community is not the restricted form of a society, no more than it tends toward a communitarian fusion; 2) it differs from a social cell in that it does not allow itself to create a work and has no production value as aim" (UC, 11). The first trait claims that finite community is neither a more intimate or smaller section of society, nor a higher or larger

unity of the whole of society. This is because finitude constitutes the entire community rather than a part of it, yet finitude is not the all-encompassing totality of social relations but the impossibility of complete communion. The second trait introduces the notion of *désœuvrement*—translated as unworking, idleness or inoperativeness. This means that finitude is not the sort of thing that can be the focus of activity. The limits of life always elude the significance each of us or others try to give them. The finite community places itself and its members beyond any particular task. A social cell forms to serve some purpose, only to be disbanded once it is done, but finite community as such never serves a purpose, so there are no formal procedures for its gathering or dispersion. We do not know when it passes into or out of existence because it exists without essence; it has no definitive characteristics that we can identify to tell when it is waxing or waning.

According to Blanchot, community hovers between absence and presence, impossibility and possibility; at no time does it exist. With respect to the past, community is not tied to the perpetuities of land or blood. It is not the object of nostalgic celebration. It continually erases itself, leaving nothing to which we could consider ourselves either faithful or unfaithful. As to the future, community cannot be anticipated as a destiny or realized as a goal. We do not know what a new community will look like, so we cannot wait for it as an expected end or work towards it. It cannot be tied to hopes for the future because it is never brought to fruition. Furthermore, community does not exist in the present, at least the essence of community does not reside in any actual concrete community. Blanchot considers the absence of community positively: “An absence of community is not the failure of community: absence belongs to community as its extreme moment or as its ordeal that

exposes it to its necessary disappearance” (UC, 15). The experience of the presence of community requires that actual concrete communities become absent. It is the absence of these communities that makes the presence of community an urgent issue for us. If its specific formations dissolve, if it necessarily disappears, then we must resolve over and over to make it appear again. The danger is that the failure to create lasting communities could convince us that community should not exist, and keeps us from attempting the task altogether. He thinks that the worst we could do in view of former failings is to treat community derisively as an illusion with which we were enthralled but from which we now are free. Instead, we must commit to constantly creating it anew.

Thus one will discover that it also carries an exacting political meaning and that it does not permit us to lose interest in the present time which, by opening unknown spaces of freedom, makes us responsible for new relationships, always threatened, always hoped for, between what we call work, *oeuvre*, and what we call unworking, *désoeuvrement*. (UC, 56)

Thus there is a tension within community between its absence and presence. It is at work and it unworks itself. It is idling, waiting for engagement and guidance, though it will never reach the destinations to which we direct it. Community is unoccupied, a free space not yet filled and a space of freedom never to be fulfilled.

Despite Blanchot’s claim about the exacting political meaning of community, he is far from exact about it. His is a deeply paradoxical position: “Here perhaps we touch upon the ultimate form of the communitarian experience, after which there will be nothing left to say, because it has to know itself by ignoring itself” (UC, 25). He is saying that the communitarian experience or the experience of community occurs outside of all concrete communities. That is, if we describe community but there is something more to say to each

other about it, then we can be certain that we have not described community because it is not captured in what we say about it. This is why community is unavowable. Yet, if it cannot be avowed, how can we know what it is or whether it is? How are we supposed to create it when we cannot recognize it? This ambiguity is a serious shortcoming of his concept of community. He provides three examples of his concept of community—people, the couple, and friendship<sup>1</sup>—but no example clarifies this abiding ambiguity. Instead, they reveal the problem of neutrality which haunts his anarchistic concept of community.

#### 4.1.1. The People and Their Power

The ambiguity of Blanchot's concept of community is seen in his analysis of the people in view of the events of May '68. To him, the most important thing about these events is the evidence of a new way to conceive of the people different from the State and civil society. He says that "the people . . . are not the State, not any more than they are the society in person, with its functions, its laws" (UC, 33). In particular, the tension between the absence of community and the presence of community is constitutive of their strange status in the political sphere.

They are there, then they are no longer there; they ignore the structure that could stabilize them. Presence and absence, if not merged, at least exchange themselves virtually. That is what makes them formidable for the holders of

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<sup>1</sup>Jean-Pol Madou states that Blanchot's concept of community is a political utopia of multiplicity and an ethical obligation to singularity: "Blanchot sees as privileged these two forms of apparently opposed communitarian manifestation: the limitless and anonymous presence of the people—May '68—and the world of lovers—Bataille and Duras." See "The Law, the Heart: Blanchot and the Question of Community," trans. Thomas Pepper, *The Place of Blanchot, Yale French Studies* 93 (1998), 62. Yet this pairing misses the importance Blanchot places on friendship as a mixture of the other two forms of relation.

a power that does not acknowledge them: not letting themselves be grasped, being as much the dissolution of the social fact as the stubborn obstinacy to reinvent the latter in a sovereignty the law cannot circumscribe, as it challenges it while maintaining itself as its foundation. (UC, 33)

The interplay of the people between the presence and absence, the simultaneous dissolution and foundation of their social fact, points to their ambiguity with respect to politics and sociality. They are the fullness and emptiness of political power and social life, “momentarily occupying the whole space and nevertheless without a place (utopia)” (UC, 33).

The people’s ambiguous position shows the anarchistic quality of sovereignty itself; they are the exception to and the foundation of community. Blanchot thinks that the interplay of absence and presence is the basis for a different form of sovereignty outside of politics—the power of powerlessness. This condition is characterized by the term that appears throughout his writing—neutrality—but here he uses two words for neutrality: refusal and impotence. With respect to the first, he says that the people are “without determined political wills and therefore at the mercy of any sudden push by the formal institutions against which it refused to react” (UC, 31). The people are neutral like a force field that can be discharged in many ways but has itself no charge until it is touched by something else. Refusal means that the people no longer represent a specific position in the political sphere because it is a refusal to be represented by the state or civil society. The positive refusal of representation is related to the negative notion of impotence:

Presence of the *people*? Recourse to that complacent word was already abusive. Or else it had to be understood not as the totality of social forces, ready to make particular political decisions, but as their instinctive refusal to accept any power, their absolute mistrust in identifying with a power to which they would delegate themselves, thus mistrust in their *declaration of*



*impotence.* (UC, 31)

The declaration of impotence is the resistance to politics as an arena of competing positions. The indecision and indeterminateness of the people is their tactic against a political rule that would want them to take sides and declare their support for some cause so it can combat them. There is strength in the unwillingness to take action because power is preserved by not expending it. However, the extent to which the impotence of the people means avoiding any action suggests that it is also an excuse for not acting at all (UC, 32).

According to Blanchot, the events of May '68 and the different forms of the people and their powerless power allows us to recognize a new concept of community. The essence of community among the people is not captured as a revolutionary or even reactionary response to present political institutions. He says: "It was not even a question of overthrowing an old world; what mattered was to let a possibility manifest itself, the possibility—beyond any utilitarian gain—of a *being-together*" (UC, 30). Since the demonstrators neglected any authority, including those who would presume to speak for them, their interests could not be negotiated and "a sort of communism declared itself, a communism of a kind never experienced before and which no ideology was able to recuperate or claim as its own" (UC, 30). Communism claims to be free from the influence of ideology, but Blanchot defends the true communism that is not controlled by so-called communistic ideals and directives. The people's non-recuperation into political interests and resistance to competing claims is crucial to his concept of community.

Three things in Blanchot's description of the people militate against calling it communism and make it more appropriate to consider it anarchism. Firstly, his insistence

that community is effervescent and does not endure is far more anarchist than the idea that human nature is finally realized at the end of history brought about by communism. If there is revolution, it is one in which the work of humanity is not finished because it reaches its end only to revolve or turn around to begin again and again. The notion of permanent revolution which does not use or establish power pulls it away from communism towards anarchism. Secondly, as opposed to determined and directed activity of communists, the aimlessness of the demonstrations to which he draws attention is characteristic of anarchism. This aimlessness is essential to community, not the simulation of disorder ready to restore order. Thirdly, he emphasizes the anonymity of the crowd. He comments that the action committees formed at the time cannot be considered the leaders or guides of action because they did not distinguish themselves from the crowd but absorbed themselves into the crowd. The crowd is an acephalous and anarchistic community. All of these things comprise the neutrality of the people, a notion of neutrality that is crucial to his anarchistic conception of community.

Blanchot's thought is problematic because of his anarchistic conception of community. In particular, he offers no resources for sustaining the supposedly explosive event of community. While it is important to draw attention to the critical times when the spirit of community arrives and withdraws, to the twilight between its coming and going, a complete account of the life of any actual community should include the time between its birth and death during which it is maintained. We may understand and share his wariness of compromising the community of the people for effectiveness and expediency in party politics, but it is unreasonable to think that community should not outlast its first outbursts.

Blanchot's insistence on the neutrality of the people and their power requires the rejection of those institutions meant to support openly public forms of community, and this is unacceptable.

#### **4.1.2. Love and Law**

A shift in focus becomes obvious in Blanchot's discussion of the couple; in seeking a different model for his concept of community, he no longer looks to the public domain of politics and economics, but the private domain of passion and eroticism. The couple also displays an ambiguity to the state and civil society. Yet the movement from public sphere to private sphere does not escape the problems of neutrality, since other problems of neutrality emerge, especially with responsibility to those outside the intimate relation. That is, his thought raises the question of whether love remains merely erotic or may become ethical.

Blanchot gives love an anarchistic quality opposed to organized human relations when he characterizes the community of lovers as a challenge to the state and civil society: "The community of lovers . . . has as its ultimate goal the destruction of society" (UC, 48). Moreover, the destruction of the generality of social relations by the exclusivity of the love relation is an aspect of the destruction of the world as a whole. "There where an episodic community takes shape between two beings who are made or are not made for each other, a war machine is set up or, to say it more clearly, the possibility of a disaster carrying within itself, be it in infinitesimal doses, the menace of universal annihilation" (UC, 48). Love obliterates the world because our obsession with the particular other takes us and the other

out of the world. Our responsibility to a particular other supplants our responsibilities to the rest of the world, making us irresponsible in the eyes of everyone else. Love, far from grounding our concern for the whole community, makes us indifferent and disrupts community as a whole. To him, the singularity of the community of lovers obliterates the generality of state and civil society with “the strangeness of that antisocial society” (UC 33).

Though Blanchot thinks that love is antagonistic to organized human relations, he refers to the difficulty of recognizing the excessive character of love because it is often formalized as a contract: “From this one could conclude that the absoluteness of the relationship has been perverted from the onset and that, in a mercantile society, there is indeed commerce between things but never a veritable ‘community,’ never a knowledge that is more than an exchange of ‘good’ procedures” (UC, 35-36). Here he claims that the possibility of community that occurs in excess is circumvented by relations modeled on exchange and equivalence. Levinas enters Blanchot’s text at this point, especially concerning the similarity of eroticism and ethics in their opposition to established laws. Both of them think there is a distinction between the economic community and the erotic and ethical communities. In the last two, exchange is surpassed by an excess that cannot be equalized. That is, eroticism and ethics are anathema to the state and civil society because they are “agnostic” towards law to the extent that each “unsettles any social relationship, just or unjust” (UC, 40).

However, it is not clear that eroticism and ethics are similar forms of excess or inequality, or that Blanchot and Levinas have similar takes on the matter. Together they challenge the dichotomy between eroticism and ethics that considers eroticism as the

ruination of law and ethics as the realm of law, and claim that both have laws that are distinct from legalized relations. There is a law of eroticism and a law of ethics prior to any moral regulations that determine whether acts are acceptable or transgressive, legal or illegal. Blanchot asks: “But is morality law and does passion defy all law? That is precisely what Levinas does not say” (UC, 43). He thinks that love, in both its erotic and ethical forms, is before or beyond law, but he is reluctant to fully forge the link between eroticism and ethics and reserves for eroticism rather than ethics the role of refusing all laws. To him, only lovers oppose the laws of the state or civil society that are economic as well as ethical.

Blanchot’s restriction of love is further brought out by his insistence that the couple’s escape or separation from the community as a whole does not enable them consummate their relationship. In fact, he thinks that there is community between couples because their relationship is never consummated:

Here is the room, the closed space open to nature and closed to other humans...where two beings try to unite only to live (and in a certain way to celebrate) the failure that constitutes the truth of what would be their perfect union, the *lie* of that union which always takes place by not taking place. Do they, in spite of all that, form some kind of *community*? It is rather *because* of that that they form a community. (UC, 49)

For Blanchot, the relation of lovers is opposed to the union that is the aim of the State or society. Rather, the lie of union, the fact that it does not take place though it is thought to, is the truth of this form of community. There is community in the couple because there is no complete communion of them into one unit; they retain their separation within their relation. The secret concealed by lovers is that they are never totally together. That is, lovers keep the secret that community is possible and impossible at the same time. The presence of community is based on an absence of community, an absence of socially sanctioned

relationships, but it also hides the absence of community that cannot be fulfilled by any relationship. Where such an absence does not exist or is not experienced because of the presence of others, those who want to belong together as lovers must dissolve communities.

Ultimately, Blanchot's insistence on the exclusive and non-consummated relation of lovers is evidence of his unwillingness to move from eroticism to ethics. Levinas criticizes such unwillingness when he describes the erotic relation of lovers as a non-social relation of voluptuousness: "The relationship established between lovers in voluptuousness, fundamentally refractory to universalization, is the very contrary of the social relation. It excludes the third party, it remains intimacy, dual solitude, closed society, the supremely non-public" (TI, 264-265). For him, the impossibility or impropriety of fully expressing what happens between lovers is a sign of its non-significance with respect to the established significations of the State and civil society. It is not a matter of lovers failing to achieve recognition from others; rather, lovers seek to isolate themselves from others. In fact, it is their mutual attention to each other that creates, for Levinas, the defective community to which they belong (TI, 265).

According to Levinas, the non-social closed community of lovers in voluptuousness should be broken by the community of the couple with child created under the conditions of fecundity and paternity. The couple alone shelter themselves from society but also separate themselves from society in ecstasy; with the conception of a child the couple is still a shelter from the danger of society but they are no longer separated from society because they create a more intimate society. The child is oneself and other than oneself, and this signifies the multiplicity of society itself (TI, 269). For Levinas, the erotic relation of enjoyment and immediacy becomes an ethical relation of goodness with in the conception of a child. It is

not that the couple who do not or cannot conceive a child is unethical but that the couple who have no interest in anything outside of their relationship is unethical. The child represents the movement from the pure pleasure of present human relations to the commitment to the future of human relations, and as such bears the sign of hope and goodness in life. He refers to “the marvel of the family” as the human relation that exists outside the law: “The family does not only result from the rational arrangement of animality; it does not simply mark the step towards the anonymous universality of the State. It identifies itself outside the State, even if the State reserves a framework for it” (TI, 306).<sup>2</sup>

Blanchot and Levinas share a view of love only insofar as it has the double aspect of self-absorption and welcoming of the other which “brings into relief the ambiguity of an event situated at the limit of immanence and transcendence” (TI, 254). Yet Blanchot neglects the task that is so crucial for Levinas: negotiating the specificity of the ethical obligation to the particular other and the legal or political generalization of obligations in the State and civil society. Though he endorses the passionate relation with the particular other to the exclusion of others in general, which Levinas identifies as an ingredient of ethics, he denies that this passionate relation involves social conventions, which Levinas sees as necessary for the development of ethics. Blanchot leaves couple in the condition of anarchy outside of

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<sup>2</sup>Blanchot and Levinas fall on either side of the dichotomy identified by Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*: “We are saying much the same thing when we derive the antithesis between civilization and sexuality from the circumstance that sexual love is a relationship between two individuals in which a third can only be superfluous or disturbing, whereas civilization depends on relationships between a considerable number of individuals. When a love-relationship is at its height there is no room left for any interest in the environment; a pair of lovers are sufficient to themselves, and do not even need the child they have in common to make them happy.” Sigmund Freud, *Civilization, Society and Religion*, ed. Albert Dickson, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 298.

regulated relations. He thinks that love resists orders outside the relationship; it is a refusal of purpose. To give a reason for loving that others can understand is to reduce love's excess to exchange. This much accords with our usual intuitions about love. However, the desire to keep couples from becoming family is a philosophical prophylactic; eroticism without ethics has no issue. Blanchot's community of lovers is neutered.

#### 4.1.3. The Secret of Friendship

Friendship is the third type of community Blanchot outlines—a face-to-face relation that involves the third party. His definition of friendship is anarchistic because it is the end of the sovereign subject, whether public or private. Friendship is “a desperate movement to sovereignly deny sovereignty” (UC, 25). Friendship ruins sovereignty through one's relation to others; bringing one to the limit of oneself as it brings one towards others. In this respect he refers to two forms of friendship: “friendship for oneself all the way to dissolution; friendship of the one for the other, as the passage and as affirmation of a continuity that takes off from the necessary discontinuity” (UC, 22). These forms of friendship—friendship with oneself in which one overcomes one's present self to move towards one's future self, and friendship with others in which one overcomes one's isolation towards intimacy with others—are related; they are limit-experiences of the sovereign subject. The operations of sovereignty are lead to the inoperativeness of sovereignty.

Blanchot thinks that friendship involves the interplay of solidarity and solitude, but he seems to emphasize the latter. “Such is, such would be, the friendship that discovers the unknown we ourselves are, and the meeting of our solitude which, precisely, we cannot be



alone to experience” (UC, 23). If friendship is where one meets one’s solitude in solidarity with others, then solitude is neither overcome by solidarity nor a lapse into solipsism because we experience it in solidarity. Blanchot recalls Bataille’s feeling of abandonment and aloofness during World War II, claiming that “if . . . he lives solitude all the more deeply in that he is unable to bear it, he knows all the better that the community is not destined to heal or protect him from it, but that it is the way in which it exposes him to it, not by chance, but as the heart of fraternity” (UC, 25-26). What is significant about this is that solitude is not eradicated but exacerbated by community. That is, solitude rather than solidarity seems to be the essence of friendship. Friendship requires solitude to reveal solidarity; friends keep themselves apart from community to be a part of community.

Blanchot thinks that friendship is an unavowable community because it brings with it the obligation to keep silent about friends. “Friendship,” Blanchot’s tribute to Bataille on the occasion of his friend’s death, is a reflection on the difficulties of understanding the nature of friendship and the obligations that pertain to it, particularly those that relate to speaking of and for friends. Death poses a problem for friendship, not just because the friends are absent from each other, but because the separation between friends is removed.

And yet when the event itself comes, it brings this change: not the deepening of the separation but its erasure; not the widening of the caesura but its leveling out. . . . In such a way that at present, what was close to us not only has ceased to approach but has lost even the truth of extreme distance. Thus death has the false virtue of appearing to return to intimacy those who have been divided by grave disagreements. This is because with death all that separates, disappears. (F, 292)

Blanchot implies that the separations that exist in life are should not be overcome but increased by death. He warns us not to try to cross the distance between friends, or the divide

between life and death, with words (F, 292). However heartfelt, words can only close the distance which is inherent in human relations, and cover over the divide that separates life from death. It is a mistake to fill the void of a friend's absence with words. To replace the friend who is absent with words is to be unfaithful to the finitude of friendship as something destined to disappear. We are loyal to friends to the degree that we affirm their death and do not keep them artificially alive in memory (F, 289).

To Blanchot, friendship is for the unknown, whether the friend is alive or dead. The unknown quality of friendship does not liberate friends but restricts friends:

We must give up trying to know those to whom we are linked by something essential; by this I mean we must greet them in the relation with the unknown in which they greet us as well, in our estrangement. Friendship . . . does not allow us to speak of our friends but only to speak to them, not to make of them a topic of conversations (or essays). (F, 291)

If friends are bound by something essential, those friends and that something essential are unknown. He thinks that friendship does not licence an intimacy. The absence of friends in life or death does not allow us to break the confidences of friendship, because it brings our obligation to them to its peak since they cannot speak for themselves. Blanchot defines friendship as a form of discretion in terms of interval and interruption:

Here discretion lies not in the simple refusal to put forward confidences . . . but is the interval, the pure interval that, from me to this other who is a friend, measures all that is between us, the interruption of being that never authorizes me to use him, or my knowledge of him . . . and that, far from preventing communication, brings us together in the difference and sometimes the silence of speech. (F, 291)

Leslie Hill calls this "the ethics of discretion . . . that shuns the risk of indiscriminate

disclosure in order to affirm the value of distance and silence.”<sup>3</sup> The ethics of discretion demands that we do not betray the confidences of friendship: firstly, that we do not seek untoward intimacy or assume the mask of false intimacy among friends; and secondly, that we do not engage in gleeful indiscretion with others besides friends.

The ethics of discretion means that friendship forms around a third party that is unnamed. To Blanchot, this third party appears in philosophy and as philosophy. He mentions Bataille’s friendship for those who were reading Nietzsche during the war, making much of the fact that the figure who brought them together remained unnamed but recognizable to those who considered themselves friends: “the interlocutor is not named, but he is shown in such a way that his friends may recognize him, without naming him; he represents friendship as much as the friend” (UC, 23). In “Our Clandestine Companion” (1981), he refers to philosophy as the clandestine companion that accompanies his companionship with Levinas. “Philosophy would henceforth be our companion day and night. . . . It would be the clandestine friend we always respected, loved” (CC, 42). However, in both these cases Blanchot risks contravening his own warning to keep the secret about friendship. Friendship is a sign or gesture recognized only by friends. Friendship is a secret shared between friends, one friends must keep from others as well from themselves. Friends cannot speak about the secret that makes speaking to each other possible. That is, the secret of friendship is such that it is no longer be true of those who tell it. It bears little scrutiny unless friends seek to dissolve their friendship. The third party around which friendship forms is secrecy itself. This is a paradoxical position. What is the status of these expressions

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<sup>3</sup>Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997), 5.

of the secret of friendship? What does Blanchot's speaking 'say' about his friendships with Bataille and Levinas?

Blanchot thinks that friendship happens through writing, but writing is excluded from friendship if it identifies friends. He offers the following formulas for friendship : "*friendship for the unknown without friends*" and "*friendship for the exigency of writing which excludes all friendship*" (UC, 24). This means two related things. Firstly and simply, it means that friendship is related and unrelated to writing. Friendship is directed towards and through the writing that is never an adequate expression or extension of friendship; writing does not completely capture the feeling of friendship and it does not fully offer friendship. Every word of friendship fails to do justice to the demands of friendship; friendship avoids definition. Secondly and more problematically, it means the friendship of writing is related and unrelated to community. He thinks that "if friendship calls forth upon the community through writing, it can only except itself" (UC, 23). Friendship is never included in the community to which it refers because the condition or cause of the relation is not part of the relation. It is simultaneously the foundation of and exception to community. We may say that friendship is neutral with respect to specific definitions and particular groups of people. Friendship is anarchistic.

The value of friendship is that it pertains to the people and the couple, applicable to public and private relations, insofar as it involves the third party in its intimacy, the interplay of solidarity and solitude. Friendship is an obligation for individuals and organizations, one that urges us to be unfaithful to actual concrete communities and faithful to the essence of community, to betray our stable institutions in an effort to extend them into the future. This

is expressed when he refers to the groups that gathered during the events of May '68 as "the circles of friends who disavowed their previous friendship in order to call upon *friendship* (camaraderie without preliminaries)" (UC, 32). However, while they disavowed personal friendships for impersonal friendship, the intention or result is nonetheless unavowable. Friendship is neutral with respect to concrete communities and the essence of community; it lies between the community that exists and the community yet to come, forever excepting itself from them. Friendship is anarchistic because it promotes relations that exclude themselves from all communities to create community. The question remains, though, whether or not friendship founds community, or whether it is just another example of the problems that plague the unavowable community. We well wonder, especially with the ethics of discretion and the emphasis on secrecy, if friends are responsible to anyone outside their particular relation. In other words, is friendship a suitable basis for a community of more than two? How much does the exclusive and exceptional character of friendship trouble the community as a whole? What would happen to the uniqueness of friendship were we successful in generalizing it through the community?

#### **4.2. The Problem of Neutrality**

Blanchot's characterization of the people, the couple and friends, their ambiguous relation to the state and civil society, is anarchistic insofar as they are human relations outside of established orders and seek a sense of justice other than the laws of the land. In each case, he maintains neutrality with respect to social institutions on the grounds that neutrality is the condition of existence. Blanchot's neutrality raises serious issues about his

concept of community. Specifically, it poses the problem of how to determine what responsibilities we owe to each other and how to discharge those responsibilities when we accept them. Much of the difficulty or dissatisfaction with his anarchistic concept of community comes from his emphasis on neutrality, the most recurrent theme of his thought. His inability to come to terms with responsibility stems from his insistence that neutrality is the condition of life and that we must sustain it in our own lives. Neutrality has an ontological sense and an existential or ethical sense; it applies to the possibility of life and the positions we take to it.<sup>4</sup>

Blanchot's notion of neutrality is influenced by Levinas' definition of neutrality as the irrevocable givenness of life in *Existence and Existents* (1947): "This impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable 'consummation' of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself we shall designate by the term *there is*. The *there is*, inasmuch as it resists a personal form, is 'being in general'."<sup>5</sup> Neutrality is the persistent stream of life into which beings are born and which continues past their deaths; a featureless flow. It is the excess of existence that cannot be recuperated or appropriated to our interests, a radical indeterminacy for which we cannot account. In *The Step Not Beyond* Blanchot indicates the difficulty of conceptualizing neutrality, characterizing main themes of postmodern thought:

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<sup>4</sup>Leslie Hill translates Blanchot's term *le neutre* with the relatively unaltered word 'the neutre' to escape the sexual connotations of 'neuter' and the political emphasis of 'neutral' (Hill, 1997, 252). However, the term 'neutrality' avoids making it a name and draws attention to precisely the political implications attendant on its ontological and literary meanings.

<sup>5</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: duquesne University Press, 1978), 52.

The neuter: we think we grasp it if we invoke forms of passive action as marked and remarkable as those, precisely of chance, of the random, of the unconscious, of the trace and of the game. And many other forms could be proposed without ever satisfying: the *sacred* in relation to *god*; *absence* in relation to *presence*; *writing* (taken here as non-exemplary example) in relation to *speech*; the *other* in relation to *me* (and to this me that the other is as well); *being* in relation to *existence*; *difference* in relation to *one*. (SNB, 73-74)

Neutrality, the indeterminacy of life, is recognized by the impossibility of conceiving it, especially in terms of oppositions. To him, it is the differential pluralism of “neither one nor the other, the other, the other” which rejects and upsets the synthesizing dialectical logic of ‘either-or’ (SNB, 77).

If neutrality exceeds conceptual capacities, outstripping oppositions through repetition, what position should we take to it? What possibilities can it recommend for community? The problems emerge in Blanchot’s thought when we understand that his notion of neutrality is underpinned by anarchism’s cynical conception of power as a repressive force which should be avoided if justice is to prevail. His anarchistic approach to the concept of community proposes two options for neutrality—refusal and passivity. That is, anarchist neutrality refuses existing orders and refrains from forming new orders. These two terms reveal the limits of anarchist neutrality insofar as his focus on total critique leads to the inability to offer any alternatives and his emphasis on the passivity of responsibility becomes an apology for inaction. Both forms of neutrality are anarchist, one is critical, the other is quietist; we will consider each in turn, and conclude that his anarchism is problematic because it is only critical but never creative.

#### 4.2.1. The Right of Refusal

Blanchot argues for anarchism throughout his writings. In the 1930s, disappointed and impatient with the two political options current at the time—parliamentary democracy and proletarian dictatorship, he proposes to shake up the people with little regard for the consequences except that it mobilize them to strengthen France. In the 1960s he adopts similar tactics without the nationalistic tone, this time in concert with the leftists who opposed to colonial involvement in Algeria and the illegitimacy of de Gaulle's government. In the 1980s he advocates the utopian nature of the people that cannot be co-opted by petty political interests. Ultimately, Blanchot anarchism means he counsels insubordination and insurrection in opposition to the absence of authority in the state and civil society.

Steven Ungar points out that Blanchot's journalism from the 1930s is proof of his fascist tendencies, but they are also evidence of his attitude to anarchism.<sup>6</sup> The articles Blanchot wrote for *Le Rempart* in early 1933 are united by their opposition to parliamentary democracy, which he thought was at the mercy of private interests. In "La Révolution nécessaire" [The necessary revolution] he decries socialism and communism as handmaids to the democracy and dictatorship that had relinquished their duty to save France, and calls for the insurrection of an unjust spiritual revolution (SA, 94). In "La Révolte contre le pouvoir" [Revolt against power], he supports the refusal of the people to pay excessive taxes to the extortionist government that is an arbitrary authority and drains off the power of the

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<sup>6</sup>Steven Ungar, *Scandal and Aftereffect: Blanchot and France since 1930* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 94; cited hereafter as SA. See also Jeffrey Mehlman's analysis in *Legacies of Anti-Semitism in France* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) and *Genealogies of the Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).



people (SA, 94). “Quand l’Etat est revolutionnaire” [When the State is revolutionary] incites to anarchistic sentiments that counteract the anarchy of the existing state, claiming that the disorder force is the only way to overthrow a government that hides its own disorder under the illusory order of parliamentary democracy. The ultimate goal is the replacement of a government which effectively no longer exists with one that has the true authority of the people, “a government without anarchy” (SA, 96; Ungar’s translation).

Blanchot’s hostility to the state survives the transition to the journal *Combat* three years later. In “Le France, nation à venir” [France, a nation to come] he criticizes pacifism because it fails to protect the precarious position of France, but he claims that France cannot be found in its institutions because it exists only a possibility for the future (SA, 109-110). “Le Caravénserial [The carvanserai] does not just seek to overthrow and replace the government, but suggests that a position outside of politics is necessary, and “On demande des dissidents” [Dissidents wanted] elevates dissidence as a value to cure the ills of the people’s caused by the foreign policies of the left and the right (SA, 109-110).

The call to violence sounded still louder from the journal *L’Insurgé*, when in “Ce qu’ils appellent patriotisme” [What they call patriotism], he admonishes the ineffectiveness of so-called radicals, and advocates violence in the hope that a social catastrophe will awaken the population to their degradation (SA, 111-112). This is nowhere more evident than in “Le Terrorisme, méthode de salut de public” [Terrorism, a method of public safety] which, though the title states it explicitly, suggests that terrorism could lead the public to safety beyond the dangers of oppression by an inept and unjust government.

We are not among those who prefer to adopt the call for a peaceful, spiritual revolution, which is both senseless and cowardly. There must be a revolution,

because a regime that holds everything and that has its roots elsewhere cannot be modified. It must be ended, demolished. This revolution must be violent, because one cannot draw from a nation as deadened as our own the strength and passion suited to renewal by decent measures, but instead by bloody jolts, by a storm that will shake it up in order to awaken it. This not at all peace of mind, but that is exactly what must be avoided. This is why terrorism seems to us at present a method of public safety. (SA, 124; Ungar's translation)

His comments, especially concerning the storm shaking up the nation, are similar to what was said by right-wing reactionaries at the time, but it is also possible to see them as an anarchist call to indiscriminate violence against the totality of the state for the sake of the people, whose interests are either poorly represented or outright repressed. Blanchot does not want complete anarchy because he thinks that anarchist tactics are a transitional phase towards another better order.

In "The Right to Insubordination" (1960), Blanchot describes the 'Declaration of 121' opposing France's role in the Algerian War in anarchist terms as a particular response of intellectuals with no political allegiance to the corruption of democracy. He considers this anarchistic because it is the action of apolitical individuals who nonetheless recognize the importance of social life other than the relations that exists at the time. It is an anarchist appeal to justice above the laws of the land (BR, 196). He insists that insubordination is most strongly expressed as a right rather than a duty because individuals should take responsibility for their freedom separate from a public morality. Insubordination is legitimate when the authority of the state is absent, but its legitimacy is self-founding and directed to the future (BR, 197). To the objection that insubordination would lead the nation into anarchy, he answers that the nation is an anarchy:

But the anarchy is to be found in the fact that the army has been allowed to

become a political force, and also in the fact that the present regime came to power thanks to a military *coup d'état*, which consequently condemns as illegal from the outset that imperious order which it claims, in its august way, to represent and to impose on us. Since May 1958 we have been in a state of anarchy. (BR, 197)

Distinct from his call to indiscriminate violence against the totality of the state, an advocacy of partial instead of complete anarchy, here he draws attention to the Declaration as a specific charge against the government's involvement in the Algerian War rather than "a call to anarchy, denying and contesting the authority of the State in all circumstances" (BR, 197). He stresses that the Declaration has an anarchistic quality since "it does not seek to have any immediate political effect, or more precisely: it will be effective precisely in so far as it has taken no account of any considerations of practical or political efficacy" (BR, 198). This reveals his cynical conception of power because it implies that power is always repressive, and that powerlessness is just or that justice occurs outside of power relations.

The cynical conception of power in anarchism is evident in "Sade's Reason" (1947), where Blanchot considers Sade the monstrous result of the French Revolution. He stresses that the freedom and equality of individuals in nature and under law leaves them without recourse to anything higher, except an appeal to power. "He discerned perfectly clearly that, at the time he wrote, power was a social category, something established on the organization of society such as it was before and after the Revolution" (BR, 77). He thinks that the key to Sade's ambivalence to the Revolution is his view of power as it pertains to institutions and individuals: "Power, in fact, can make any kind of regime serve its ends. It denies authority to them all, and in the core of a world perverted by law it creates an enclosure in which law is silent, and where the sovereignty of the law is ignored rather than resisted" (BR, 80). Since

power persists in all social systems and undermines the legitimacy of all governments, the authority is established by force. In other words, force is a factor of every relation, including those that are free and equitable. An anarchist tries to escape such conditions, not by opposing one power with another power, but by disregarding power relations altogether. “And so, if Sade recognized his own features in the Revolution, it was only in the measure to which the Revolution represented for a time the possibility of a regime without law during the course of the transition from one law to another” (BR, 80). Anarchism does not create new laws to replace old laws, which would be more oppression, but suspends itself outside the one perverted by law by perverting the notion of law with the law of perversion. It succeeds as long as it sustains the break between orders, but the longer it does, the more it becomes stable, ending the suspension. The contradiction of anarchism is that it too must use force to be above the law. To avoid this contradiction, the other alternative left to anarchism is to do nothing, the option later taken by Blanchot.

Blanchot develops the idea of suspended order in the anarchist notion of permanent revolution when he returns to Sade in “Insurrection, the madness of writing” (1965). He distinguishes madness as a form of fixation that restricts freedom to establish order, and madness as an explosiveness that brings the possibility of freedom outside of order. Both forms of madness are released in revolution—“the one founding an era and opening history, the other being that from which history will always want to close itself off” (IC, 221). This means that freedom is forever unfinished and history is in need of continual renewal. He refers to the fictional treatise ‘Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, if we are to be a Republic’ in Sade’s *Philosophy in the Bedroom*:

It says that living in a republic will not suffice to make a republican, nor will a republic be made by having a constitution, nor finally, will laws make this constitutive act that is the creative power endure and maintain us in a state of permanent constitution. We must make an effort, and still always another. . . . Sade calls this permanent state of the republic insurrection. In other words, the republic knows no state only movement—in this it is identical to nature. (IC, 222)

Constant insurrection is necessary to maintain the republic against its enemies, external and internal. The enemy of the republic is inertia and “revolutionary vigilance excludes all tranquility,” meaning that it is never conservative and never self-satisfied (IC, 222).

Revolution depends on the distinction between morality and immorality; compared to the institution of morality, revolution appears immoral, but revolution is also a morality opposed to an immoral ruling order. This explains the importance given to criminal acts in arousing the outrage of the people in a corrupt state. Once that righteous energy is unleashed, it can be directed towards the ineffectiveness and illegitimacy of the government: “Virtue embraces crime in times of anarchy” (IC, 224). Revolution is not a matter of using crime for the sake of crime, but a matter of using crime against the crime of the state; it is anarchy against anarchy. Blanchot cites *The Story of Juliette*:

The reign of laws is vicious; thus lawful rule is inferior to anarchy; the greatest proof whereof is the government’s obligation to plunge the State into anarchy whenever it wants to reframe a new constitution. To abrogate its former laws it is driven to establish a revolutionary regime in which there are no laws at all: from this regime new laws finally emerge. But this second State is necessarily less pure than the first, since it derives from the earlier one, and since in order to achieve its goal, constitution, it had first to install anarchy. (IC, 224)

Sade thinks that there is never freedom and equality under a government, since we are always victims of laws. To him, general laws cause more injustice than individual impulses, because we are weakened when we give our power to the law, especially if it oppresses or

restricts us, but outside the law it is possible to find the resources to withstand the dangers of individual impulses (IC, 225). Thus the revolutionary moment that creates new social orders and organizations from old ones only occurs when law is silent or absent altogether. “Sade therefore calls the pure time of suspended history marking an epoch a revolutionary regime: it is the time of the between-times where, between the old laws and the new, there reigns the silence of the absence of laws” (IC, 226). To Blanchot, new regimes are never as good as old regimes, and neither are as good as anarchy which makes the transition from one to the other possible. Anarchy is thus the transition between two orders, which is better than the order it destroys and the order it heralds, but it is not meant to last, like any unavowable community.

Blanchot’s notion of anarchy as a time between orders is seen in a series of pamphlets written during the events of May ’68, in which he reflects on revolution as a break. “A Break in Time: Revolution” states that the revolution is possible precisely at the point when society falls apart and the authority of its laws falters, but revolution only exists as a moment of suspension between two orders: “The only moment in which revolution is present is that of its real possibility. At that moment, there is a stop, a suspension. In this stop, society falls apart completely. The law collapses: for an instant there is innocence; history is interrupted” (BR, 205). “Affirm the Break” calls for an indiscriminate denial of every form of power. This is similar to the vitriol of his earlier work when he advocates dissidence against an unjust state or against a state of injustice, though it is different in that the revolution is not just the transition between two orders but a break from all orders, a discontinuity which never achieves continuity. Here he wants to sustain the suspense, so to speak: “The break

with the powers that be, hence with the notion of power, hence everywhere that power predominates. . . . Radically affirm the break: that is the same as saying (this is its first meaning) that we are at war with things as they are” (BR, 200). He thinks that the break is not just a refusal of previous conditions, since it negates even what has not existed, but also an affirmation that is pure, because it depends on no previous condition for its significance. It is not directed at any actual power, but the potential of power to effect life.

This theoretical undertaking obviously does not entail drawing up a programme or a platform, but rather, independent of any programmatic project, indeed of any project, maintaining *a refusal that is an affirmation*, bringing out or maintaining an affirmation that does not come to any arrangements [*s'arranger*], but rather undoes arrangements [*déranger*], including its own, since it is in relation with dis-arrangement [*le désarrangement*] or disarray [*le désarroi*]. (BR, 201)

The most important implication of the idea that the revolution does not establish another order but breaks from all orders is that the revolution is more anarchist than communistic if it has no project or programme. In “Communism without a Heritage” he advances an anarchistic communism: “Marx said with calm forcefulness: *the end of alienation can only begin if man agrees to go out from himself* (from everything that constitutes him as interiority): *out from religion, the family and the State*” (BR, 202). He laments that communism became a national party, that it sought to serve limited political interests. Instead, he offers the formula he has often repeated in various ways: “Communism: that which excludes (and is itself excluded from) any already constituted community” (BR, 203). Communism succeeds to the extent that it avoids being co-opted by other interests and circumvents the achievement of its own aims. Revolution is not a renewal of politics but a break from politics.

Blanchot's unavowable community is anarchist to the extent that he would have us understand that the events of May '68 were "contrary to 'traditional revolutions'" because they did not aim at overthrowing the ruling order and replacing it with another (UC, 30). His notion of revolutionary break as a suspension or turning in time, and as a utopia of the unknown, is heard when he says that the people are "an instantly realized utopia . . . in suspension as if to open time to a beyond of its usual determinations" (UC, 31). Anarchism, unlike communism, is not satisfied by any project or programme; an anarchist community cannot take any enduring form—it must not last—in order that its essence survive its instantiations (UC, 32). Anarchists reject representative government, whether of the ruling order or another order, and are thus outside political oppositions. They are an apolitical force or force against politics. They are autonomous, free for the future, but they question the meaning and implications of autonomy (UC, 33).

The problems of anarchism come to the fore when Blanchot claims that culture is a regulated system of significations that is restrictive of cultural actors and cultural artifacts, if not outright totalitarian. In "Ars Nova" (1963) he states that the anarchical quality of art is not the desire for destruction of all culture, because it seeks something outside the totality of culture as it is. He suggests that the violence of anarchy is its mark of civilization—its critical force and refusal to accept things that have outlived their value (IC, 347). What is important to him, though, is that anarchism appeals to a value other than humanism. It "wants to concede nothing to the 'human' that society is always ready to appeal to as an alibi for its own inhumanity" (IC, 349). Blanchot leaves little doubt about the aims of anarchism. It is tactic against ruling orders that seeks to hide injustice and illegitimacy, especially under



the so-called 'civilizing' values of humanism. Anarchism claims that these values do not obtain simply by being promoted, that they are not the right values to promote, and that their promotion hinders the achievement of more important values. However, he is unclear what he supports instead of humanism.

Gerald L. Bruns points out that Blanchot's anarchism is not utopian, but dystopian, because he denies the ideal of the total state and offers no alternatives. "Blanchot's anarchism is a critique of sovereignty, that is, a critique of Hegelian rationality in which the negation of the singular is the first principle of every systematic construction of the spirit."<sup>7</sup> He says that Blanchot's anarchism is apparent in his argument against purely procedural justice which suppresses our rights and our capacity to criticize because it is assumed that the system is just and in no need of reform:

Rules also suppress the rights which go along with the notion of law, and establish the reign of pure procedure which—a manifestation of technical competence, of sheer knowledge—invests everything, controls everything, submits every gesture to its administration, so that there is no longer any possibility of liberation, for one can no longer speak of oppression. (WD, 144)

Bruns speculates that Blanchot's experiences with fascism and Vichy's complicity during the Occupation effects his conception of what alternatives to ruling orders are possible (Bruns, 31). Refusal is not resistance, but a mode of dissidence and an affirmation of difference outside the totality which the ruling order cannot understand because it is inoperative rather than effective. Anarchism means that alternatives are impossible outside

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<sup>7</sup>Gerald L. Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 32.

of totality of the state.<sup>8</sup>

What values can an anarchist espouse? What responsibility does an anarchist accept? To Blanchot, the short answer to both of these questions is, none. Anarchism conceives of everything in terms of repressive power, and to avoid continuing the things it criticizes, it cannot offer any alternative. Anarchism is a self-enforced neutrality with respect to social institutions; it admonishes everything equally, but it advocates nothing equally too. Anarchist neutrality is limited because it is effective as a critical tool, but it is ineffective for the creation of community. The extremity of this problem is shown with his insistence on the passivity of responsibility which claims that responsibility is impossible.

#### 4.2.2. The Passivity of Responsibility

In his first lengthy analysis of neutrality, “Literature and the Right to Death” (1947), Blanchot navigates between two positions as a writer. He defends literature against Hegel’s charge that it is an irrelevant and irresponsible activity, but denies that literature must answer Sartre’s call to engagement (WF, 301-302). To those committed to a cause, the writer is an ‘idler’ dabbling with words, but he criticizes writers who appeal to a particular public or allow art to serve other interests. He thinks that art that has political purposes, either from

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<sup>8</sup>Allan Stoekl points to the same cultural context when he calls Blanchot an anarchist. Maurice Blanchot, *The Most High*, trans Allan Stoekl (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), xxix. Leslie Hill counters that descriptions of Blanchot as an anarchist are incorrect: “Anarchists have in common a profound repugnance for the authority of law. Blanchot on the other hand, has ultimate respect for the law.” Leslie Hill, *Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot: Writing at the Limit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 191. However, his claim fails to appreciate a distinction made by Blanchot and anarchists: a refusal of the particular laws of the land and an acceptance the universal laws of justice.

writers seeking to support a cause, or from those committed to a cause, confronts its own recalcitrance with respect to political purposes, and could lead the public to disown the work or denounce the writer (WF, 309). The writer cannot take solace in an ideal value; his or her honesty is not to himself, herself, or even to others, but to art, which resists establishing truth. “This shifting on the part of the writer makes him into someone who is perpetually absent, an irresponsible character without a conscience, but this shifting also forms the extent of his presence, of his risks and his responsibility” (WF, 311-312).

In “The Silence of Writers” (1941) Blanchot warns against anyone who implores writers to ignore recent artistic innovations in order “to devote themselves to a new collective ideal, to enlist in the service of a social order which culture must both express and construct” (BR, 26). He heeded this call with his journalism in the 1930s, but rejects it for neutrality. Writers are not public educators, champions of homeland or tradition, or promoters of political ideals they are ill-equipped to judge (BR, 27). When he emerges from silence to assist various causes—in May ’58 to oppose the war with Algeria, and in May ’68 to take part in demonstrations—he always wonders whether writers can be expected to know how to handle difficult political problems, but he never offers an alternative that meets our expectations about responsibility.

In “Intellectuals under Scrutiny” (1984), Blanchot continues to claim that when those involved in specialized scholarship become intellectuals by passing from being citizens engaged in private research to being figures imbued with public responsibility, they are in dangerous territory and it is not certain that they know how to conduct themselves. “For as long as they have borne the name, intellectuals have never done anything other than cease

momentarily to be what they were (be it a writer, a scientist, or an artist), so as to respond to moral dictates which are both obscure and imperious” (BR, 223). For Blanchot, the resolution to the problem of the abuse of authority by artists and scientists in political discussions is to become absorbed into the anonymity of the crowd whenever they do support a cause (BR, 224). It is hard not to see this as a disclaimer of responsibility altogether. The blind adherence to a principle or action, especially by those who possess some measure of influence, is problematic, but the solution should not be bought at the price of not acting at all or concealing actions in mass movements. This sort of neutrality in is invoked by those who say they are merely functionaries of a power or following a procedure.

Blanchot’s attempt to fashion some semblance of responsibility from neutrality is evident in his essays from the 1950s and 1960s, collected in *The Infinite Conversation* (1969), which appeared after the publication of Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity* (1961). His specific concern is to think community in terms of the ‘relation without relation’ heralded by Levinas: “What of the human ‘community,’ when it must respond to this relation of strangeness between man and man—a relation without common measure, an exorbitant relation—that the experience of language leads one to sense?” (IC, 71). The relation without relation is one in which each element in relation remains unrelated because there is nothing common between them, and one which is itself unrelated to a higher order that might adjudicate it. The difficulty of his task is indicated when he claims that neutrality is not the third term of mediation that establishes community but the relation without relation to the unknown that exceeds community. “It exceeds all community . . . nor does it establish between two beings a common relation, even by the intermediary of the unknown. (The

unknown, as neutral, cannot serve as an intermediary inasmuch as every relation with it . . . falls outside of all relation.)” (IC, 216). Can he maintain neutrality and a commitment to community?

Blanchot states that relations under the condition of neutrality are “terrible . . . but without terror” (IC, 59). They are terrible because there is no universal value which would ground them or guarantee their outcome, but they are without terror as long as no universal value is imposed on them as a final solution. Neutrality requires that we acknowledge this terrible quality without lapsing into terrorism in trying to resolve it:

It is most terrible because it is tempered by no intermediary. For in this view there is between man and man neither god, nor value, nor nature. It is a naked relation, without myth, devoid of religion, free of sentiment, bereft of justification, and giving rise into neither pleasure nor knowledge: a neutral relation, or the very neutrality of relation. (IC, 59)

Neutrality upholds the uniqueness of each existent. It requires that we forgo reference to force or law, an earthly fraternity or a divine order (IC, 51). Contrary to the charge that responsibility is impossible without some common measure, Blanchot claims that responsibility begins in the absence of transcendent third terms. To him, proper philosophical response to neutrality is to be fearful but nonviolent: “The philosopher . . . would be someone who is afraid of fear . . . of the violence that reveals itself in fear and that threatens to transform him from a frightened man into a violent man; as though he feared less the violence he suffers than the violence he might exercise” (IC, 50). Philosophy at best relates to strangers and foreigners without making them similar or familiar, while at worst it represents the cold calculation with which violence against strangers and foreigners can be carried out. We should not turn others into ourselves, but rather maintain their integrity as

an unknown quantities. This seems to mean doing nothing. Blanchot comes close to the excusing inactivity to avoid the potential for harm.

The passivity of responsibility is the main theme of *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980), Blanchot's consideration of Levinas' second major work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974). The dis-aster—"break with the star, break with every form of totality"—is the anarchical neutrality of human existence in the endless expanse of darkness and absence of anything that guides or guarantees our responsibility (WD, 75). Responsibility spells disaster for the self—not the disaster suffered *by* the self, but the disaster suffered *as* the self; not what the self undergoes, as if it gets stronger through a test, but that the self goes under and no longer is itself. "For responsibility is the extreme of *subissement*: it is that for which I must answer when I am without answer and without a self save a borrowed, a simulated self, or the 'stand-in' for identity" (WD, 22). The other in need does not call for someone specifically but for everyone and anyone, and when one comes to the aid of the other one is simply the first come or least of all people, an anonymous rather than unique being. The passivity of responsibility is indicated by Blanchot's claim that the disaster is not an emergency *to which* we respond but the demand *that* we respond. Responsibility is not a choice, but circumvents choice. It is not something which calls forth our freedom to act or not act, but precedes and preempts our freedom. The disaster is the obligation that befalls us. It is passive responsibility, one's powerlessness with respect to the other (WD, 22).

Blanchot's claim that responsibility is passive challenges the Enlightenment notion of responsibility as an activity. He rejects the idea that moral life only makes sense with the

supposition of freedom, and that our moral character is determined by the way in which we use our freedom, whether we defer to the will alone or attend to the circumstance of action.

With barely veiled sarcasm he writes:

Responsibility: a banal word, a notion moralistically assigned to us as a (political) duty. . . . Responsible: this word generally qualifies—in a prosaic, bourgeois manner—a mature, lucid, conscientious man, who acts with circumspection, who takes into account all elements of a given situation, calculates and decides. The word ‘responsible’ qualifies the successful man of action. (WD, 25)

Responsibility is raised and ruined simultaneously; the other always asks for a response, but one’s ability to respond always falls short of what is asked. Yet this failure is due neither to the fault in human nature nor the intervention of unforeseen events that frustrate our intentions. It is the inherent impossibility of taking responsibility. “That is why responsibility is itself disastrous—the responsibility that never lightens the Others burden (never lightens the burden he is for me), and makes us mute as far as the word we owe him is concerned” (WD, 27).

Though Blanchot is influenced by Levinas’ notion of responsibility, he rejects the ethical interpretation of it. They both stress the passivity of responsibility, but Blanchot thinks that it rests with neutrality which does not decide for or against any action and is inimical to the mediation of ethics, whereas Levinas thinks that it supplants neutrality with the specificity of the ethical relation. In “Against the Philosophy of the Neuter” Levinas puts Blanchot with Hegel and Heidegger who contribute to the ontology of impersonal truth (TI, 298-299). He thinks that the insistence on neutrality and the neglect of ethics are of a piece:

To affirm the priority of *Being* over *existents* is . . . to subordinate the relation with someone, who is an existent (the ethical relation), to a relation with the Being of existents, which impersonal permits the apprehension, the

domination of existents (a relation of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom. (TI, 45)

Moreover, the interest in ontological neutrality conceals the effects of the impersonal power: “Universality presents itself as impersonal; and this is another inhumanity” (TI, 46). The supposed impartiality of truth, which is meant to be a common measure for finding agreement, instead intervenes in the relations of people. Neutrality makes us inhuman rather than more human. Thus ethics requires us to reject neutrality, and replace anonymity and universality with attention to the personality and partiality of each being. Using ‘community’ to mean a relation where beings are fused and confused together and ‘society’ to mean a relation in which the uniqueness of each being is recognized, he writes: “Concretely our effort consists in maintaining, within anonymous community, the society of the I with the Other” (TI, 47).

Gillian Rose voices criticisms of Blanchot too. That responsibility is not something we take up but something into which we are taken, a denial of freedom, makes it difficult to see what it means theoretically and practically. She questions the quietism that rests on his cynical conception of power, resigning us to doing nothing because doing anything exercises one’s power over the other. She warns of grave dangers with his emphasis on neutrality, which she deems to display a stoic indifference to suffering.<sup>9</sup> She finds truly troubling, especially with his attitude to Auschwitz, his insistence that we cannot understand suffering and that the interjection of knowledge into our relations is to be assiduously avoided as a mark of our respect for others (MBL, 120). Instead, she thinks that the other who is in need

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<sup>9</sup>Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 116; cited hereafter as MBL.



and without power is precisely in need of our power and we must exercise it if we are to assist the other. Also, assisting the other assumes some knowledge of the other's suffering, if not of the other himself or herself. Thus, challenging his claim that power is always repressive, in contrast to passivity beyond passivity, she conceives of responsibility as an activity beyond activity (MBL, 121). This still puts our responsibility outside the realm of reciprocity and mechanisms of exchange, but it does not rule out the opportunity to know something about the suffering of others and to act justly for the sake of others (MBL, 122).

Blanchot's neutrality means that he never lessens the uncertainty in community. It is always a dangerous relation, emerging from the excess of existence or the brute fact of being. His insistence on neutrality is revealed when he resists three temptations to interpret human relations as an ethics of goodness, the perfection of society, or the trust of friendship (SNB, 61). He thinks that all of these entail bad descriptions of community insofar as they eradicate fear and reduce the precariousness and the preciousness of community. His anarchism emphasizes the uniqueness of each existent and each encounter. To establish institutions for community is to deny its unaccountability and unavowability, while anarchism "consecrates *the always uncertain end* inscribed in the destiny of the community" (UC, 56). However, insofar as anarchism involves the refusal of representation and the passivity of responsibility, it is uncertain what we know about community and whether we could do anything about community. Blanchot's thought is limited because he criticizes community but he cannot create community.

## CHAPTER 5

### NANCY: THE INOPERATIVE COMMUNITY AND ONTOLOGICAL POLITICS

Community without community is *to come* . . . it is always *coming*,  
at the heart of every collectivity

— Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*

#### 5.0. Introduction

Jean-Luc Nancy is influenced by Bataille and Blanchot, but advances beyond them. Though he adopts some of Bataille's approach to the sacred in modern life, he does not share the predilection for secret societies or the tendency to revel in quasi-mystical experiences. Though he and Blanchot have similar interests in the indeterminateness and inoperativeness of literature, he does not emphasize the ethical indifference of literature. Instead, he is interested in relating the nature of community as an absence or incompleteness to a political reflection centered on absence and a political task that cannot be completed. To this end, Nancy considers community ontologically; the community of existence and existence as community. He thinks community is best understood when it is not grounded in a common characteristic supposedly possessed by members of a group but when it is seen as a 'sharing' of existence that is simultaneously distributed to each being and divided into each being. There is a sociality more originary than any organization of social life.

On this basis Nancy opposes 'the political' and 'politics'—the former refuses

community as a unity and the latter affirms community as a unity. To him, the closure of politics is a lack of concern with community, because the matter is either considered settled or simply set aside. He criticizes as totalitarian any attempt to achieve a complete community through the immanence of social spheres. He defends the idea of democracy in which community resists all transcendent principles except the freedom of existence itself. To him, the communist revolution is the perpetual motion of community returning to itself in its fruitless search for foundations. He revives the notion of natural law when he refers to the sovereignty of the law of the world or global law over and above the laws of sovereign states, not the hierarchy of a new world order, but the proliferation of networks over the surface of the earth. Three things recommend considering Nancy an anarchist: his cynical conception of power as inherently totalitarian, his insistence that community exists only outside of politics though it has political force, and his recourse to the idea of natural law understood as a form of freedom rather than order. However, his anarchism undermines his search for alternative forms of community. The ontological orientation to community is outside of concrete social relations and unable to judge among competing claims.

### **5.1. From the Existence of Community to the Community of Existence**

It is impossible to separate Nancy's ontology of community from his political commitments, but it is important to isolate his concept of community in order to see how it then influences the development of his political philosophy. He announces his intention to investigate the concept of community in "Sharing Voices" (1982), where he defines 'sharing' (*partage*) as a distribution and division of speech in which every voice is an articulation of

meaning that is at once a unique instance and a common property of language (SV, 243-244).

At the end of the essay he uses sharing to introduce his desire to rethink the concept of community, and he has spelled out its implications throughout his thought.

The sharing (the dialogue) is understood here as a provisional necessity, whether this is fortunate or unfortunate, whether it is an enrichment or an impediment to the community of interlocutors. On the horizon resides a communion, lost or still to come, in meaning. But, in truth, that which is the communion is only to be involved in communication. It is neither a horizon, nor an end, nor an essence. . . . The community remains to think according to the sharing of the *logos*. This surely cannot be a new *groundwork* for the community. But it perhaps indicates a new task with regards to the community: neither its reunion, nor its division, neither its assumption, nor its dispersion, but its *sharing*. Perhaps the time has come to withdraw every *logical* or teleological founder of the community, to withdraw from interpreting our being-together, in order to understand, on the other hand, that this being-together is only, for all that it is, the shared being of the '*divine logos*.' (SV, 247-248)

Especially with this last sentence, sharing becomes the bridge between 'retreating the political' in the two senses of withdrawing and redrawing the political realm to which he and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe devoted themselves in *The Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political* (1980-1983), and the ontological concept of community as existence that he develops in *The Inoperative Community* (1986), and essays such as "Of Being-In-Common" (1991) and "The Compearance" (1992).

Nancy's work shows the influence of Heidegger insofar as he insists on the importance of the so-called ontological difference between Being and beings, and adopts the idea that the metaphysics is a wrong turn in the history of the West, though there are neglected or unused resources within the tradition of Western thought that can be mobilized for key concepts. While he has a retrospective view on the concept of community, he claims that it is not so much a retrieval of a truth that we have forgotten as a requirement to

question the truth we have taken for granted. He identifies four forms of thinking about community which can coincide: community as the general problematic of order and disorder tending towards foundational practices, which characterizes the Ancient and Medieval period; community as the place of ‘unsocial sociability’ tending towards regulation, which is Kant’s term but is also applicable to Hobbes; community as the subject of a history, which is readily evident in Hegel and Marx; and community as an ontological responsibility for being-in-common which he inherits from Heidegger (C, 396).

#### 5.1.1. The Inoperative Community

The central text for Nancy’s concept of community is *The Inoperative Community* (1986), where he criticizes everything we have so far referred to as community in order to clear the ground for a new concept of community. He challenges the sociological claim that modernity is characterized by the loss of community or consciousness that community is lost, whether it is considered as a family, guild, city, republic, corporation or brotherhood (IC, 9). In each case, it is seen as the dissolution of harmonious relations which were represented through rituals and symbols, distinct either from society, which dissolves community in a simple association through the division of forces, or from empire, which dominates community under its rule. Nancy is suspicious of the nostalgia of the retrospective view that community is an intimacy and identity that is lost. He claims that the consciousness of the loss of community is part of the Christian tradition for which community is understood as communion in Christ. Two things are in tension—*deus absconditus* or the absence of God, and *deus communis* or the brotherhood of humanity in God. He thinks that the experience of

the disappearance of the divine stirs the desire for the brotherhood of humanity:

Thus the thought of community or the desire for it might well be nothing other than a belated invention that tried to respond to the harsh reality of modern experience: namely, that divinity was withdrawing infinitely from immanence . . . and that the divine essence of community—or community as the existence of a divine essence—was the impossible itself. (IC, 10)

Nancy questions the concept of community based on the assumption that there is a fullness of life from which society descends or diverges. Instead, he states:

*Community has not taken place. . . . No Gesellschaft has come along to help the State, industry and capital dissolve a prior Gemeinschaft. It would undoubtedly be more accurate to say . . . ‘society,’ the dissociating association of forces, needs, and signs—has taken the place of something for which we have no name or concept. . . . Society was not built on the ruins of a community. It emerged from the disappearance or the conservation of something —tribes or empires—perhaps just as unrelated to what we call ‘community’ as to what we call ‘society.’ So that community, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is what happens to us—question, waiting, event, imperative—in the wake of society. (IC, 11)*

This is a direct criticism of Tönnies’ *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft* distinction (usually translated as community/association), especially insofar as it privileges the former over the later and laments the loss of agrarian or traditional models of relation to the advance of industrialization and corporate models of relation. Nancy suggests that the things we have called community, whether they are kinship groups or nation-states, to differentiate it from the business of civil society, are not community at all (IC, 11).

According to Nancy, community is not lost; we are lost to the extent that we allow ‘society’ to substitute for community or satisfy our search for community. Yet the feeling of loss comes from our acknowledgment that society is not an adequate substitute or does not satisfy us. Society poses a problem, not just because it serves as a poor replacement for community, but because it prevents the coming of community. Community is absent, yet it

is absent with respect to the future rather than the past (IC, 12). We are a community when we turn towards the relations that do not yet exist, rather than return to what has happened and ended. Community is the horizon at which we will never arrive. The disappearance of and despair for community that characterizes modernity is still present, but a new view is necessary because nostalgia has unaltered or worsened our situation. His specific contribution towards solving this issue is his ontological orientation to the concept of community.

According to Nancy, the project of finding or founding lost community is not only based on a nostalgic illusion but is also inherently totalitarian (IC, 16). Community as a complete communion cannot be achieved, and were it achieved, it would destroy community. He cites Bataille's criticism of those politics that establish community on an experience of death: "Community is calibrated on death as on that of which it is precisely impossible to *make a work*. . . . Community occurs in order to acknowledge this impossibility . . . the impossibility of making a work out of death is inscribed and acknowledged as 'community'" (IC, 14-15). Nancy's considerations lead him to Blanchot's word *désouevrement*—meaning 'unworking' and 'idleness'—to coin the term 'inoperative community'.<sup>1</sup>

[C]ommunity is made or is found by the retreat or by the subtraction of something: this something, which would be the fulfilled infinite identity of community, is what I call its 'work.' All our political programs imply this work: either as the product of the working community, or else the community itself as work. But in fact it is the work that community does *not* do and that it is not that forms community. (IC, xxxviii-xxxix)

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<sup>1</sup>It is also translated as "community at loose ends" to signify not only that community is frantic in its search for itself, but that it unravels at its limits and is woven into other things. See *Community at Loose Ends*, ed. Miami Theory Collective (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xiv.

He claims that what community cannot make work or make into its work, what it cannot operate and appropriate is that around which it coalesces or constitutes itself. Most likely thinking of the events of May '68, he states: "Community is the unworking of work that is social, economic, technical, and institutional" (IC, 31).

To Nancy, the notion of work presupposes the self-presence of a subject through the modes of production and the products in which it recognizes itself. To see community in terms of work is to see it in terms of subjectivity. "Community understood as work or through its works would presuppose that the common being as such be objectifiable or producible (in sites, persons, buildings, discourses, institutions: in short, in subjects)" (IC, 31). Nancy claims that community understood as a work is not social but subjective. The inoperative community, by interrupting or suspending work, breaks into and breaks up the operations of the self-present subject. "That which is not a subject opens up and opens into a community whose conception, in turn, exceeds the resources of a metaphysics of the subject" (IC, 14). The inoperative community is not a supra-subject or intersubjectivity in which separate subjects are absorbed. Nancy considers community in terms of the fact that neither alone nor together are we in an immanent relation to ourselves or with others: "Community therefore occupies a singular place: it assumes the impossibility of its own immanence, the impossibility of a communitarian being in the form of a subject" (IC, 15). The inoperative community as the impossibility of immanence challenges the importance of the self and the social; whether individually or collectively, it designates the irreducible relationality which ruptures the totality of the self and the totality of the social. He emphasizes the nature of existence as community and community as existence: "Being



‘itself’ comes to be defined as relational, as non-*absoluteness* . . . *as community*” (IC, 6).

The inoperative community denies the idea of transcendence too, because it is one’s self-overcoming with and towards others without reaching a higher order of relationality. This suggests that community does not appeal to a hierarchy, which would make it the function or effect of the transcendence, and that community does not appear as a hierarchy, which would make it transcendent. There is nothing but finitude. Community is usually understood as fusion of finite individuals in an infinite identity that transcends them empirically or ideally, but the inoperative community implies the finite non-identity of individuals and their relationality. “Finitude, or the infinite lack of infinite identity . . . is what makes community” (IC, xxxviii). According to Nancy, if community is finite, it cannot fulfill or finalize itself without becoming an infinite identity and thereby bringing an end to relationality. His task is to stop surrendering being-with or being-together to a higher order or unity that represents the withness or togetherness of being (IC, xxxix).

Nancy thinks that the inoperative community disrupts both immanence and transcendence by destroying their opposition. He proposes what we can call ‘immanent transcendence’ as a principle of community: “community does not consist in the transcendence (nor in the transcendental) of a being supposedly immanent to community. It consists on the contrary in the immanence of a ‘transcendence’—that of finite existence as such” (IC, xxxix). Community is neither the immanence of complete communion, nor the transcendence of hierarchical order, but the horizon of finitude. That is, community is our existence together at the limit. He then uses the principle of immanent transcendence to assess various political positions. In his view, the inversion of the principle characterizes the

unanimous voice of authority in totalitarianism, and the ignorance of the principle characterizes liberal democracy reduced to the management of power or the power of management (IC, xxxix). Each sees the other as an enemy, but both bring closure to community, one claiming to answer the question of community definitively and denying democratic debates as threats to order, the other claiming that there is no answer to the question of community and deriding attempts to do so as misguided or malevolent totalitarianism. To Nancy, the political realm is where community is constantly at stake. The inoperative community cannot be the object of definitive political decisions because it is stalled by endless political debates. “‘Political’ would mean a community ordering itself to the unworking of its communication, or destined to this unworking” (IC, 40).

Nancy’s inoperative community, the extent to which community unworks what we have hitherto called community, is anarchistic. His characterization of the inoperative community faces a contradiction similar to that confronted by anarchism. On the one hand, his idea that community orders itself to do something seems to attribute agency to community insofar as it proposes political projects. On the other hand, his idea of inoperativeness clearly claims that community cannot order itself to do anything; it rules out creative or destructive activity. If he accepts agency, then he accedes to the politics of the subject that he wants so desperately to avoid. If he emphasizes inoperativeness, it is hard to understand how community has significance for politics. Nancy tries to take the middle ground by making a distinction between work and task—the former meaning immanence and self-enclosure insofar as we put ourselves into a finished product, the latter meaning transcendence and self-exposure insofar as we push ourselves towards what we can never

finish: “Community is given to us with being—or we are given and abandoned to the community; a gift to be renewed . . . it is not a work to be done or produced: But it is a task, which is different—an infinite task at the heart of finitude” (IC, 35). While work is the activity to which we give ourselves, a task is given to us and interrupts the activity we would otherwise undertake. It is existence itself that gives us the task of community. While the work of community is something into which we are put, the task of community is nothing other than ourselves. Nancy’s notion of the task of community as renewing what we are given cannot be explained outside his ontological orientation to community, to which we now turn.

### **5.1.2. The Ontology of Community**

Nancy’s most succinct statement of his ontologically oriented concept of community opens his essay “Of Being-in-Common” (1991): “What could be more common than to be, than being? We are. Being, or existence, is what we share” (BC, 1). He develops an ontology from this first principle, but an ontology that changes the way in which we understand the question of community. “Henceforth 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” (BC, 1). This statement means that there is no pre-existent essence of community which communities instantiate. Nancy’s ontology of community is not a definition of the essence common to beings, but a description of existence as being-in-common. Translating Kant’s thesis that existence is not a predicate into Heidegger’s ontological-ontic difference, he says that the essence of existence is not the substance of

existents: “*Community is not a predicate of being or of existence. One changes nothing in the concept of existence by adding or subtracting communitary character*” (BC, 2). These two contradictory aspects of community—its essentiality and non-essentiality—are implied in the idea that existence only occurs as community but community does not determine existence. To say that existence is being-in-common is to say that being is not a substance that belongs to beings as a property or possession. He expresses this with the term ‘sharing’ (*partage*): “existence is only in being partitioned and shared. But this partition . . . does not distribute a substance or a common meaning . . . we are what it divides and parcels out” (BC, 5). Sharing suggests that existence is both similar and different in each instance: it is distributed to all existents, so that each exists similarly, and it is divided among all existents, so that each exist differently. What is shared is finitude, the limit of each being, so sharing is not the recognition of ourselves as similar to others but the realization of our difference from others. Nancy thinks that being-in-common means “ontology can be reduced to this being-unto-self-unto-others” (BC, 4).

The question concerning being-in-common is how to understand the ‘in’ without presupposing an internal or external relation of beings. He refers to ‘singularity’ as a pure relationality which is not the foundation but the differential of relations (BC, 6). A singularity is a “punctual actuality” or event of existence that occurs as and at the intersection where beings touch each other (BC, 7).<sup>2</sup> Nancy claims that the singular logic of being-in-

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<sup>2</sup>Nancy exploits at least two mathematical meanings of singularity for his concept of community. It is a fixed location on a field or a point on a plane towards which multiple lines converge, but it is also a discontinuity or undefined place in a function representing the impossibility of a solution.

common is evident in “unorganized groups of people” who exist between disintegration and aggregation:

They are between the disintegration of the ‘crowd’ and the aggregation of the group, both extremes remaining possible, virtual, and near at every moment . . . a relation without relation, or rather, being exposed simultaneously to relationship and to the absence of relationship. (BC, 7)

He claims that the least incident can determine our relations to each other in the direction of disintegration or aggregation, though they are moved towards individuality and collectivity at the same time. He thinks that this tension at the limit between relation and non-relation is the way in which singularities exist in community (BC, 7).

The difficulty of adopting an adequate model for community leads to the question of whether we can and should represent it at all. According to Nancy, the question of community is the question of representation: “Philosophy thus has to do with the limit where community is also suspended . . . and community perhaps has nothing, or above all is nothing common” (BC, 5). Community exists at and as the limit of our representations of it, since community is not a commonality, and representation presupposes a commonality between what is represented and what represents. The representation of community ‘spells the end’ of community because it completes community. Yet community resists all attempts to represent and complete it, whether as love, family, state, nation or people. Community is the fact that after the representations of community, we are still there together (BC, 6). The limits of community and its representations is the double bind of Nancy’s concept of community. The moment we express the essence of community, we restrict the essence to expression, but when we do not try, the essence of community remains unexpressed and we get the feeling that there is no community (BC, 9). While the essence of community is

outside of the expressions of community, the essence is not waiting for expression. We must think community each time without becoming complacent that we have thought community. A 'we' exists only insofar as we think that 'we' exist; it is through this thinking that we share being-in-common as something that is by being shared (BC, 9).

Nancy poses the problem of representation in "The Compearance" (1992), where he wonders how we can even understand what community means in the postmodern condition. He echoes Lyotard's claim that the postmodernism concerns the critique of existence as presence and thought as representation (C, 371). Postmodernism has social significance insofar as means that community cannot be understood as our presence to each other and that we cannot represent community to ourselves. Nancy nonetheless thinks that the postmodern condition reveals our originary relationality without philosophical underpinnings and political overtones. We can appreciate our relations as relations because there is nothing to intervene (C, 371). Nancy calls our unrepresentable presence 'compearance'—an old legal term meaning the appearance of parties before the court. To him, the court does not pre-exist the parties, it exists where we exist because it is existence itself. Compearance is the way in which we are present to and with each other without being able to represent this as a space separate from ourselves (C, 372). The judgement of the court is not given according to an already established law, but comes from being before all laws. Like Lyotard's differend, this is not the end of criteria, but the confrontation with a criterion which dissolves previous criteria without denying the demand for a decision. Compearance means that there is no court of God, History or Man which would hear our case and render a verdict (C, 374).

According to Nancy, if compearance means that existence is as a community, then

community is the law of existence even before the laws of communities exist. We compear before the judgement of community, “for finitude always presents itself in being in common . . . and it always presents itself at a hearing and before the judgement of the law of community, or more originarily, before the judgement of community as law” (IC, 28). There is an ultimate sociality prior to any determination of social relations: “Community means, consequently, that there is no singular being without another singular being, and that there is therefore, what might be called . . . an originary or ontological ‘sociality’ that in its principle extends far beyond the simple theme of man as a social being” (IC, 28). It is not that sociality emerges with humanity that has such a characteristic, but that sociality is the nature of existence prior to anything at all that might have such a characteristic. In other words, community is not human but pre-human. Nancy claims that community does not insert or institute itself among already existing subjects, and is therefore more originary than communion or communication, which presuppose that there are subjects who already are in an intersubjective relation—though it is not hard for him to find community more originary, once he narrowly interprets the nature of communion and communication (IC, 29).

Nancy claims that compearance as an originary sociality relegates the notion of humanity as a political animal to secondary status. He stresses the priority of ontology over politics, the relationality of community over power relations in politics. Yet compearance is not separate from politics since politics is judged according to the principle of compearance (C, 373). To him, politics restricts itself to thinking of community in terms of the liberty, equality, and fraternity of individuals, which means it is trapped in subjective systems of representation. These are not illegitimate but limited goals, because they merely

regulate the subjectivity derived from originary sociality. Instead, he seeks a politics concerned with the pure relationality of existence itself. He suggests that history has led to the task of thinking about community without representing it as a presence that is either external or internal to our relations, and now we are able to think about politics with the principle of compearance:

It is left to us—this is what is *happening* to us—to appropriate the ontology that might take us beyond this quadruple summons (liberty, equality, justice and fraternity). The ontology of the common and the share would not be other than the ontology of Being radically removed from all ontology of substance, of order and origin. (C, 374)

This is Nancy's ontological politics, the search for non-reified forms of being-in-common which would neither dominate us nor destroy us. Ontological politics makes us compear while recognizing the unrepresentable nature of compearance.

## 5.2. The Problem of the Political

Nancy's concern for community comes from his political commitments. His ontological orientation is an answer to the question of the political, but he complicates the matter because he thinks that any answer must keep open the question of the political. Accordingly, his question is not what politics produces the proper or right concept of community, but what concept of community is required if we are committed to the political. To him, the political is "the place where community as such is brought into play" (IC, xxxvii). He renders Heidegger's ontological-ontic difference as 'the political' and 'politics' (*le politique/la politique*). The persistent theme in his thought is that the essence of the political that is concerned with community as such disappears if it is identified with the



power relations of politics that consider community co-extensive with the state and civil society. Too often the stakes of community are settled, either through practical applications or relegation to the impractical. Both of these positions neglect community, since it is supposedly dealt with under the rubric of state and civil society or is deemed unimportant to state and civil society. Nancy wants to keep the political from lapsing into politics in order to reserve a place for the occurrence of community. We can now use his ontological orientation to the concept of community to determine his relation to the problem of the political, specifically to the problem of responding to totalitarianism. His attitude to democracy and communism are ambivalent, but there is an increasingly anarchistic tone to his politics.

### 5.2.1. Totalitarianism as a Closure of Politics

Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe directed The Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political from 1980 to 1983, and their writings are collected in *Retreating the Political*. Essays such as Nancy's "The Free Voice of Man" (1981) and Lacoue-Labarthe's "In the Name of . . ." (1981) set the tone by explicitly developing Derrida's investigations into the meaning of humanism in "The Ends of Man" (1968). To them, there is a totalitarian tendency in the attempt to achieve the perfection of humanity. They search for alternatives to totalitarianism, claiming that humanism is a compromised option. The cynical conception of power poses a problem for them, as seen in their "Opening Address" (1981): "In the epoch where the political is completed to the point of excluding every other area of reference (and such is, it seems to us, the *totalitarian phenomenon* itself), we can no longer decently ask

ourselves what theory would still be in a position to promise a political solution to inhumanity” (RP, 111). The completion and closure of politics that defines all forms of totalitarianism instead requires a ‘retreat of the political’ in at least two senses: first, withdrawing politics from being ubiquitous, obvious or banal—‘everything is political’—which qualifies the encompassing of all forms of life with politics; and second, redrawing the limits of the political by questioning it without the domination of political policies or philosophical concepts (RP, 113).

Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe restate their position in “The ‘Retreat’ of the Political” (1983): “Like the word ‘end,’ the word ‘closure’ indicates . . . the completion of a programme *and* the constraint of a programming” (RP, 125). They challenge the idea that politics is about developing a programme for social life. Their response to totalitarianism is to question the essence of the political to discover what in contemporary politics makes totalitarianism so attractive or hard to avoid. The retreat of the political does not require a reach back into history for an incomplete politics that existed before the completion of politics. They say, with reference to Sartre, “we could have just as easily said . . . that totalitarianism is ‘the unsurpassable horizon of our time’” (RP, 126). They outline two overlapping meanings of totalitarianism: a general form of the totalitarian phenomena as the closure of the political, seen in the domination of the political through the exclusion of other frames of reference, and the domination of the philosophical through the sovereignty of the subject; and the technical or empirical content of existing totalitarianisms, such as fascism, nazism and bolshevism, that reincorporates and reorganizes the social life in response to democratic indeterminacy (RP, 127). They think that the essence of the political in

totalitarianism is rarely reached by most empirical theories about totalitarianism. They suggest it is necessary to ask three questions of any analysis of totalitarianism: whether it is applicable to type of totalitarianism as well as the specific figures of totalitarianism, whether a more insidious or 'softer' totalitarianism is installed in society through the domination of technical criteria, and whether the opposition between totalitarianism and democracy is too simplistic, since nothing guarantees that totalitarianism is not produced by democracy (RP, 128).

Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe describe the totalitarian logic of capital. It is not states or even international corporations but the free market that wields power now. This totalitarianism abandons all social life, including the state, to the illegitimate and unregulated forces of the market. They add another dimension to the debate about the nature of totalitarianism, and may yield an understanding of domination without order. The new totalitarianism within social life require a new analysis other than in terms of power politics. It is not that everything becomes political by dissolving the separation between the state and civil society under authoritarian rule, but that nothing becomes political through the disappearance of the state as authorized rule, leaving only civil society without regulatory principles to keep its separate social spheres from interfering with each other. When the separation between state and civil society dissolves, the closure of the political is the achievement of unity among the social spheres; when the state disappears due to the ascendancy of civil society, the closure of the political is the forfeiture of the task of achieving an order for social life. In other words, the new totalitarianism is the end of the political, not through the domination by the state, but through the disappearance of the state

that makes the autonomous activities of social life lose their specificity. The retreat of the political, a retracing and a return of the political, is the resistance to totalitarianism by reinstating the separation between state and civil society in order to reconceive their relation.

Claude Lefort challenges Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's emphasis of the relation between totalitarianism and democracy. In "The Question of Democracy" (1983) he encourages the revival in French political philosophy, but he criticizes the "intellectual temperament" of those on the left who weave esoteric philosophical theories but become political realists when they take the tendency of something as its actuality.<sup>3</sup> He cannot accept their claim that because democracy once opened the path to totalitarianism, as Germany's experience with National Socialism shows, democracy is actually totalitarian. Instead, stressing the importance of distinguishing between different forms of society, he argues that democracy is not totalitarian, but that the indeterminacy of power relations at the heart of democracy has lead to impatient totalitarian resolutions to its problems (DPT, 13). Rather than criticize democracy for its indeterminacy and associate it with the tendency to seek totalitarian resolutions, it is better to treat democratic indeterminacy and the totalitarian attempts to subvert it as separate phenomena. However, he thinks that leftist intellectuals, caught between the totalitarianisms of fascism and communism, have forgotten the relation between philosophical reflection and the democratic idea of freedom. If they are to offer any alternative they must reconsider the idea of freedom (DPT, 9-10).

The merit of Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's is that it opens the possibility of thinking

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<sup>3</sup>Claude Lefort, "The Question of Democracy," *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 9; cited hereafter as DPT.

about totalitarianism as trend or tendency of societies in general, rather than as a historically specific type of society. They are insightful about that fact that totalitarianism is not experienced in the same way now as during the inter-war period and that modern democracy is not that of either Athens or America's founding fathers. The result is that the difference between actual totalitarianisms and actual democracies may not be as great as assumed. However, while they rightly reject the oversimplified opposition of them, Lefort is correct to charge that their reaction oversimplifies the identity between them. It is unclear what grounds they have for thinking that democracy is so dangerously close to totalitarianism, except an overly narrow view of history. They limit their examples to the downfall of Weimar Germany under National Socialism and their own experience of Vichy's collaborationist government, but extrapolate from these specific cases to conclude that they are exemplary of 20<sup>th</sup> century democracy. They neglect the stable but banal democracies of Britain, Norway and Canada, for instance. To them, democracy is inherently at risk of degenerating into totalitarianism. This unwarranted conclusion stems from the anarchist attitude that institutions are essentially totalitarian.

### **5.2.2. A Defense of Democracy?**

Nancy's defense of democracy softens the distinction between the political and politics and refines the relation between totalitarianism and democracy. He seems to recognize the limits of the Centre and responds by strengthening his ontological orientation to the concept of community. In *The Inoperative Community* he claims that the essence of the political does not deny the empirical power relations of politics but demonstrates how

we can escape them even as we are implicated in them. In fact, he emphasizes the need to wield power at exactly the point where democratic consensus makes us forget that democracy has assured the rise of economic and technical powers that politics is unwilling or unable to control. To him, the longer democracy tolerates the disappearance of the essence of political for the sake of economics or technology, the closer it comes to destroying itself (IC, xxxvii). He still thinks that there is no empirical politics without the essence of the political, no power relations that are not involved with the question of community. He warns not to consider democracy as the final achievement of a non-ideological politics at the 'end of history' because this makes us lose sight of community as what is at stake in the political. Democracy must keep open the question of community as the essence of the political in order to explain the power relations of politics (IC, xxxviii).

Nancy also admits that there is a greater gap between totalitarianism and democracy than he first thought when he defines democracy in contradistinction from political programs that either suppress expressions of community, as tyranny does, or reduce community to the self-evidence of an essence, as totalitarianism does. He thinks that democracy simply expresses the fact that "such an essence is inexposable" (BC, 11). He does not say there is nothing to community to be expressed, but that what there is about community cannot be completely expressed. He cannot accept the 'all-or-nothing' attitude to community. He accepts democracy insofar as it tries, without perfection, to represent community. Nancy criticizes democracy for hindering an ontological orientation to community, because such things as capital and law replace community as the supreme measure of relations in democracy. Thus he states that democracy "lacks being" because what is common is

represented as something separate from us rather than as what we are already (BC, 11). Nancy is cautious about criticizing democracy because any alternatives run the risk of bringing us worse evils of exploitation and extermination. Yet the greater risk is to settle for a democracy that is merely a technical politics or politics of technique, and deserts the community of existence for an empty image of community or an essentialist unity of community (BC, 11). While this is far too modest a task for those who would give democracy a more noble goals, he considers it the lesser evil compared to the other two alternatives of tyranny and totalitarianism. He acknowledges that this could be considered as an apology for the status quo in a democracy that is not living up to its ideal, or an analysis of the ideal of democracy that ignores the facts of exploitative economic conditions (BC, 11).

We must test the strength of his support for democracy by focusing on his definitions of freedom and justice in community. In *The Experience of Freedom* (1988) he considers freedom and community as contemporaneous and coextensive; they both emerge at the same time and they both extend only as far as the other (EF, 66). However, he thinks that the interrelation of freedom and community has been lost with the reduction of freedom to freedoms, which neglects the freedom of community as such for the regulation of freedoms within concrete communities. He therefore introduces the distinction between the ontological notion of 'freedom' as existence itself and the political sense of practical 'freedoms' in order to understand their relation (EF, 1). He understands freedom as a regulatory idea according to which we arrange human freedoms, as when he suggests that "freedom ends—or begins—by being understood as the unrepresentable (invisible) 'in view' of which one would

have to arrange representations” (EF, 14). Yet he thinks that we can call freedom a public space as long as we understand that the public space does not guarantee freedom or freedoms; rather, this guarantee is the function of the apparatuses that get established in the public space. Similar to his concept of community as an originary sociality, he states that freedom is “singular/common before being in any way individual or collective” (EF, 74).

Nancy’s ontological notion of freedom has a negative implication about which he seems unapologetic: anti-humanism. Charitably, anti-humanism is a response to the use and undermining of humanism in totalitarianism. Critically, anti-humanism is the position of one who has conceded the emancipatory project in the face of difficulties. He admits that freedom usually takes human form, but he insists that freedom transcends its identification with humanity. That is, freedom is the pure possibility of existence without essence, which can take the form of a god or animal, as much as a human:

If it is indeed true that freedom belongs in this way to the essence of human beings, it does so to the extent that this essence of human beings itself belongs to being-in-common. . . . This means that the relation is not one between human beings. . . . In this relation, ‘human beings’ are not given—but it is relation alone that can give them ‘humanity’. . . . It is then freedom that gives humanity, and not the inverse. (EF, 73)

Nancy values the originary pre-human freedom of being-in-common because it does not depend on human arrangements of freedom and grounds human arrangements of freedom. While this seems a laudable goal, if it is the case, then one wonders why pre-human freedom results in human freedom at all. To him, freedom is the non-essential existence of humanity, which is why he thinks that the hatred of freedom that results in the effacement of the human figure is a real potential in life, but locating freedom in the rarified atmosphere of being-in-common does little to protect us against hatred and the extermination of people’s lives. There



is no reason to consider humans free, leaving us vulnerable to neglect and negation. Nancy says that freedom is crucial to community, though he does not refer to real freedoms guaranteed by concrete communities, but abstract freedom as the essence of community.

This point is brought out in “The Compearance” when Nancy claims that the democratic ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity are misplaced when they are applied to individuals or collectives rather than the sharing of singularities (C, 374). He claims that the political problem is not about regulating power to protect our rights but reaching the essence of freedom which is “right before all rights” or “right that is a right without right” (C, 390). Perhaps he is advancing a stronger sense of rights than that guaranteed by any nation or international court, but he also abstracts human rights from any concrete community that could enforce them. He comes close to declaring rights without humans at all, since he thinks that the notion of ‘humanity’ is ontologically narrow-minded. He does not declare the rights of man but the rights of no man.

The difficulties with Nancy’s definition of radical freedom are related to his ideas about justice and injustice. He claims that if freedom is the non-essentiality of existence, then justice and injustice are equiprimordial possibilities of existence. He calls absolute injustice the attempt to cut short the sharing of justice and injustice that is existence itself:

There remains, then, in spite of all, the hard flash of *absolute injustice*, of that which contravenes the ‘sharing of justice and injustice’ in which consists the nature of the ‘political animal.’ It is the hard flash of the ‘denaturation’ of politics in the heart of politics and as one of its own possibilities. (C, 391)

Nancy thinks that the ontological nature of absolute injustice means we cannot escape our responsibility for it because it is part of our existence together, while the ontic character of politics is unsatisfactory because it leaves to choice or chance our concern for specific

injustices. When we do not redress the source of absolute injustice in the neglect of being-in-common we actually cause the symptoms of specific injustices which we try to alleviate. It is a further injustice to represent the absolute injustice of stopping the sharing of our existence as the specific injustices suffered by persons or groups. Nancy's ontological orientation could lead him to dismiss concrete concerns of justice and injustice, but he thinks that such criticisms presuppose that existence is a property of persons or groups of people, and reduce existence to the quality of life. This smacks of theodicy or apologetics. If his main move is to say that justice and injustice are part and parcel of existence, then it is not clear how he can encourage justice or correct injustice. His perspective might underestimate the specific sufferings of particular people. He does not attend to the actual institutions of democracy that protect and promote freedoms.

### **5.2.3. The Communist Revolution**

Like Bataille and Blanchot, Nancy's commitment to communism is ambivalent. He does not reject communism outright, but rethinks its history to recover possibilities for a politics to come. His issue is how to acknowledge the disappearance of community and understand the enduring desire for community. Thus he states that "the gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world . . . is the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community," while repeatedly referring to Sartre's statement that "communism is the unsurpassable horizon of our time" (IC, 1). Communism is unsurpassed as a horizon because communism is the task of thinking what is unthought about community that keeps pushing the horizon ahead. However, he calls all attempts to think community

‘communism,’ to the point that he considers fascism and nazism as forms of communism, though totalitarian ones (C, 376). If communism includes all politics, including his own alternative, it poses problems for his ability to distinguish different forms. Communism not only changes meaning, but becomes meaningless because it is stretched too wide.

Nancy claims that what limited communism in the past was humanism (C, 387). Marx expresses the aim of communism as the reciprocal creation of humanity and community, and Nancy affirms this formula, though he argues that this reciprocal creation is not the work of a subject, whether an individual or collective, but the condition of the real relations in which we are immersed, which are not the object of positive science (C, 388). He thinks that humanism is no longer tenable now we have gone through the horrors of totalitarianism and entered an era of small imperialisms operating under the economic and technological imperatives of production, which ignore the issue of community altogether. The realization of humanity denies the relationality of community (IC, 22). He thus suggests that insofar as the communist opposition to totalitarianism has been subordinated to the search for an essential human community or the community of those who seek the essence of humanity, it foregoes community as such in favour of totalitarianism in another form. The reduction of everything about community to the interests of humanity reduces the thought of community to the totality of humanity (IC, 3).

According to Nancy, the limits of communism mean that it is “the archaic name of a thought which is all still to come” (C, 377). The communism still to come is not a return to more intimate forms of relation which were pushed aside or supplanted by the anonymity and atomization of industrial society. He thinks that community as such is not destroyed by

society nor designated as a special sort of society; rather, community is the space left vacant by the “dissolution of society understood as a particular state” (C, 377). Communism is still to come because its foundation is absent. To him, the task of thinking of community without foundation brings us to the place where community turns onto itself (IC, xxxix). ‘Communism’ names the place in community where revolution occurs. The communist revolution is not understood as long as it is associated with the renewal or reversal of foundations, the destruction of old orders and the creation of new ones, and does not point instead to the “incessantly present moment at which existence in-common resists every transcendence that tries to absorb it, be it in an All or an Individual” (IC, xl). Nancy says that community and communism have not yet existed and cannot exist, because they are not finally reached by the movement of revolution that never ceases to occur. Communism is a constant revolution; community revolves insofar as it searches for foundation without finding it. Nancy recalls the idea of permanent revolution without the state and reveals the paradox of an aim that can never be achieved, giving communism an anarchistic cast.

#### **5.2.4. The Law of the World**

Anarchism is present at all stages of Nancy’s thought, though it becomes increasingly obvious as he develops his ontological orientation to the concept of community. Throughout his writings he has an anarchist concept of community when he thinks that it only occurs outside of all organizations of social life. More recently, he develops an idea of the law of the world, to which we are subject but which is nothing other than our own existence together. Like Bataille and Blanchot, he reconsiders sovereignty in terms of existence, but

unlike them, his criticism of the state does not depend on an appeal to the sacred or lead to withdrawal into neutrality, but opens a path to the universal ideal of justice.

Anarchism is an aspect of Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's attack on totalitarianism. They think that the condemnation of totalitarianism as a repressive form of sovereignty to be opposed by a freer form of sovereignty obscures the fact that these forms sovereignty are both based on a unitary notion of subjectivity. For example, the idea that the state as an Absolute Subject is required to organize social life presupposes that individuals are separate subjects (RP, 117). They emphasize relationality both within the subject and between subjects. To them, the lacuna of the self accounts for the lacuna of the state. Sovereignty is not total, but split. The ruin of subjectivity in relationality is akin to rethinking sovereignty in a non-totalitarian manner (RP, 118). Contrary to criticisms that the state is inherently totalitarian, their project is to show that the state is forever divided against itself so that its pretensions to total unity are false or frustrated.<sup>4</sup> To them, the issue of sovereignty keeps community at stake, neither unifying it under a narrow political order, nor nullifying it by neglecting political order. They avoid totalitarianism by accepting anarchy without acceding completely to anarchy: "But no more is it an anarchy. It is the an-archy of the *archē* itself" (RP, 119). Anarchy is the unaccountability of order rather than the absence of order. Anarchist sovereignty signifies the lack of foundation for law. They refer to it as the non-principle principle of the political, which means that it does not have a definitive form though it founds every power relation of politics. To them anarchism means that the political

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<sup>4</sup>This is the focus of "The Jurisdiction of the Hegelian Monarch" (1982), which Nancy first presented at the Centre and published in *The Birth to Presence*.

realm neither resolves into total order nor devolves into complete chaos (RP, 129).

Nancy's anarchism is evident in his criticism of the mythic character of totalitarianism and the totalitarian quality of myth. To him, totalitarianism is mythic and myth is totalitarian when the meaning of every community is enveloped by a single image of community: all relations, man with nature, man with god, man with himself and man with others, are subsumed in an absolute community or community taken as an absolute (IC, 57). Yet he suggests that the totalitarian mythic community may be interrupted by the literature that writes about community without the authority to promulgate a common meaning which would be the basis or absolute of a new world-view (IC, 64). Literature is political in a way which cannot be accommodated by politics. This political element that resists politics is anarchistic without being "complacent anarchy" because it obeys the law of community as such (IC 70).

Nancy continues his criticism of the relation between totalitarianism and myth and advances an anarchistic alternative in *The Sense of the World* (1993):

What one calls 'totalitarianism' is the complete presentation of a sense in truth: myth, that is, but myth as reality. . . . In the fascist version, truth is the life of the community, in the Nazi version, truth is the conflagration of the people, and in the communist version, truth is the humanity creating itself as humanity. Life, fire, creation. (SW, 89)

He thinks that the problem of the political, keeping open rather than closing community, comes to one question: How can we think community without sovereignty, especially since sovereignty has become either a pure spectacle or a spectacle of purity for community? "There can be no doubt that Sovereignty, as an identification of the 'common' with the *decision* of being in common, has exhausted its resources of sense to become a pure *effect*

*of truth*, the effects of which, in turn, of course, cannot fail to be effects of ‘purification’” (SW, 90). He argues against state sovereignty because it becomes a cause for which one must sacrifice oneself to support the community or for which others are sacrificed when they are thought to threaten the community, but he is not opposed to sovereignty if it refers to the privileged value of being-in-common beyond all politics. “Sovereignty has no doubt lost the sense it had, reducing itself to a kind of ‘black hole’ of the political. But this does not mean that the sense of being-in-common, inasmuch as sense itself is in common, does not have to make itself sovereign in a new way” (SW, 91). Nancy thinks that the loss of state sovereignty is not the loss of sovereignty as such, but the loss of what has hindered attempts to think the sovereignty of existence itself. He is not interested in the contested sovereignties of concrete communities but the sovereignty of the essence of existence as a community. He wants a global politics in which ‘the world’ is indeterminate and does not become a cause for sacrifice. This leaves the task of rethinking sovereignty without the state and as the whole world. Nancy’s anarchism emerges when he says that the coming politics will see “a sense that cannot be subsumed under the signification of a ‘State’” (SW, 92).

Nancy acknowledges that state sovereignty is never dissolved, though it is indefinite. He identifies two different functions of sovereignty, according to two views of ‘the people’ and two views of community: the Nation-State as a secularized sacred around which subjects gather, and the city as a empty space in which citizens are dispersed (SW, 105). In his view, to think of the people as subjects is to tend towards totalitarianism, while to think of the people as citizens opens the path to democracy (SW, 106). There is no pure example of either; the totalitarian tendency of the state and the democratic community are the crossroads

of politics. He rejects the opposition because he no longer accepts that the notion of the State is only totalitarianism and democratic citizenship is a “politics-without-or-against-the-State” (SW, 109).

Nancy advocates anarchism more stridently when he considers the decline of state sovereignty in “War, Right, Sovereignty—Technē” (1991). He raises the question of the right to wage war of sovereign states in an age of globalization where events effect the whole world. While there is no longer much mention of the withering away of the state, the state is now nearly nonsovereign because it is becoming a mere matter of administration in the context of technological networks (BSP, 104). While the sovereignty of states may be outmoded on a global level, he thinks that the idea of sovereignty as such is not so easy to dispel since it is an ‘archaism’ which underlies political traditions in the West (BSP, 128). The idea of sovereignty distinguishes law as authorized power from force as raw power, but sovereign states claim the right to legitimate and limited use of force. The idea of sovereignty supports the persistence of war, so it is important to think in terms other than sovereign states with the right to wage war (BSP, 130). However, we cannot refit the idea of sovereignty for the globe because sovereignty becomes problematic on a global level. Sovereignty requires legal ground, which would be the world itself in this case, but the world cannot legitimize itself in a non-circular manner because it is the totality of all authorities and has no authority other than itself (BSP, 131). The current debates about globalization neglect the crisis at the heart of every sovereignty: that exceptions make the rule, whether it is the authority to create and sustain institutions or the autonomy from those institutions (BSP, 132).

Nancy’s anarchistic task is to discover or invent an idea of non-sovereign



sovereignty. His notion of 'ecotechnics' combines an ecological and economic concern for the resources of the whole world with the technology of international information systems. It denotes the networks which cut across tribal borders and challenge territorial integrity. It is the end of politics as power relations and the emergence of the political as a general rather than restricted economy: "ecotechnics is the name for 'political economy,' because according to our thinking, if there is no sovereignty, then there can be no politics" (BSP, 135). There is no specifically political realm because it reaches every household; there is no distinctly domestic policy because we are at home everywhere. Ecotechnics is a circulation of energy and communication that signals the nonsovereignty of states under the sovereignty of the globe. "There will be no more sovereignty: this is what history means today. The war, along with ecotechnics, lets us see the place of the sovereign State as empty from now on" (BSP, 137).

According to Nancy, existence itself takes the idea of sovereignty to its limit. Sovereignty dissolves because it cannot control existence and because as there is no accounting for existence itself (BSP, 139). Nancy's anarchism is not political but ontological. Ecotechnic is anarchist to the extent that it is the law of the world which claims that there is no law of the law of the world. There is no foundation for the law of the world because there is nothing else that justifies it. "To parody Hegel, this could be called global [or world] singularity, which would have the right without right to say the law of the world" (BSP, 141). Nancy claims that the globe cannot be reduced to a common meaning, though there is only one world, but produces a plurality of meanings throughout the world. As a countervailing force to entrenched nationalisms and multinational monopolies, ecotechnics

has an anarchistic quality (BSP, 143).

In “Cosmos Basilius” (1998) Nancy characterizes the global law beyond imperial or royal law. The global law is an expression of the sovereignty of the world, to the extent that the world is autonomous and not subject to any but its own laws. However, the global law is anarchistic insofar as the world is the dispersed rather than centralized totality of all that exists and does not admit an authority over it, including its own image as a sovereign. “The sharing of the world is the law of the world. The world has nothing other; it is not subject to any authority; it does not have a sovereign. . . . Its supreme law is within it as the multiple and mobile trace of the sharing that it is” (BSP, 185). ‘Sharing’—the distribution and division of community as existence and existence as community—is the *nomos* of the cosmos, the law of the world. To do justice, all laws must measure themselves by the law of the world. However, justice is not an appeal to the world as it is empirically, which would amount to an apology for present politics, but an appeal to the world as it is ontologically, the community outside of politics that is the origin of politics. For Nancy, justice occurs when laws overcome their limits. It is not only the perpetual revolution of institutions, but the continual recreation of the world. “This is why justice is always—and maybe principally—the need for justice, that is, the objection and protest against injustice. . . . The law of justice is this unappeasable tension with regard to justice itself. In a parallel manner, the law of the world is an infinite tension with regard to the world itself” (BSP, 189). If the world is the totality of what exists, though as a plurality rather than a unity, then justice is cannot be based on a transcendent authority, but is law set against itself, the world set against itself. The law of the world never develops into sovereignty.

Justice does not come from the outside (what outside?) to hover above the world, in order to repair it or bring it to completion. It is given with the world, given in the world as the very law of its givenness. Strictly speaking, there is no sovereignty, or church, or set of laws that is not also the world itself. (BSP, 189)

This is Nancy's notion of the universal law sought by anarchists. There is neither political nor theological sovereignty, neither state nor church, superior to the absolute authority of the law of the world. Only outside of these institutions can we conceive of community under universal law. Nancy is anarchistic to the extent that he takes us to this limit of thought.

However, in "Being Singular Plural" (1996) Nancy claims that the universal law cannot be conceived. The non-representational quality of global law can take the form of either the theologico-political interdiction against representation that turns the sacredness of law into state terrorism, or the atheological and apolitical denial of representations that intervene in our relations. He thus thinks that global law need not be rejected, but it should be seen in terms of the singularity and plurality of being.

It is not so much a question of denying law itself, it is more a question of 'doing right' by the singular plural of the origin. As a result, it is a matter of questioning law about what we might call its 'originary anarchy' or the very origin of the law in what is 'by all rights without any right': existence unjustifiable as such. (BSP, 48)

We must accept the anarchy at the origin of law, catch it at the moment it founds itself. The anarchic origin of law means that there is nothing that authorizes law except existence, which is unjustifiable because there is nothing to justify it in turn. Anarchy lies at the heart of all laws. Nancy thinks that the law of existence is nothing other than community. To him, we are anarchists as long as we obey the law of community.

### 5.2.5. The Limits of Ontological Politics

Does Nancy's ontological orientation to the political provide an adequate alternative to politics? How well does anarchism respond to the threat totalitarianism? Robert Bernasconi claims that Nancy thought betrays totalitarian tendencies in two ways. Firstly, he thinks that Nancy's view of history does not satisfy the criteria for a non-totalitarian concept of community because Nancy imposes a spurious unity on the diversity of thought about community.<sup>5</sup> Nancy may be correct to indicate that the traditional understanding of community is related to the Greek family and Christian orders, but it is not certain that nostalgia constitutes them at the time they exist rather than is applied to them afterwards under contemporary conditions. He considers Nancy's claim that we no longer have anything to do with myth as self-serving, reserving the status of non-mythic thought for himself and those to whom he refers (DNC, 16). The identification of consciousness of the loss of community as a modern phenomenon fits the strategy of seeing nostalgia as constituting the traditional understanding of community, except for the break from the traditional understanding with the postmodernism he inherits from Heidegger and Derrida. Yet attempts to question the nostalgia for community are threatened by their own nostalgia for a community of those who have engaged in such questioning or the community of those who will engage in such questioning for the future (DNC, 18).

Furthermore, Bernasconi criticizes Nancy's concept of community as totalitarian because its ontological orientation is not as non-immanent as it seems. He thinks that the

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<sup>5</sup>Robert Bernasconi, "On Deconstructing Nostalgia for Community within the West: The Debate Between Nancy and Blanchot," *Research in Phenomenology*, 23 (1993), 14; cited hereafter as DNC.

impression that Nancy's concept of community is non-immanent is based on the close association between Nancy and Blanchot. He admits that the difference between them is hard to detect, particularly when they refer frequently and charitably to each other, but he suggests that the difference turns on their respective attitudes to Levinas: Blanchot agrees with the rejection of ontology as a reduction of otherness to oneness, but Nancy returns to ontology for his interpretation of community as the structure of existence (DNC, 11). Bernasconi thinks that Nancy actually condemns himself to immanence because he thinks not only that the identity of things becomes increasingly confused in community, but that there is no difference between things in community. The unforeseen result is that no matter how much community tries to resist totalities, it tends towards a totality of some sort (DNC, 13). Bernasconi's criticisms of Nancy's ontological orientation are relevant, though he neglects important aspects of Nancy's attempt to take the relationality of existence as a basis for rethinking the community in a non-totalitarian manner. At times he seems more interested in establishing Blanchot's reputation as a non-totalitarian thinker and underestimates Blanchot's ontology of neutrality.

Todd May thinks that Nancy's ontology is not itself totalitarian, but it does not provide reasons for avoiding totalitarianism. His argument draws attention to two questions in order to demonstrate that they are confused in Nancy's work: What is community? How can we conceive of community in a non-totalitarian manner? The first question is constitutive, the second normative, but when he unites them he undermines himself.<sup>6</sup> Nancy

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<sup>6</sup>Todd May, *Reconsidering Difference: Nancy, Derrida, Levinas and Deleuze* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 23; cited hereafter as RD.

claims that exposure rather than enclosure, is a necessary aspect of community, and that it is logically contradictory to deny it. This is just not true; it might not be desirable, but it is possible to consistently conceive community in other ways (RD, 26). Nancy also says that community is not a common substance, and thereby resists totalitarianism. Yet it is not clear that the notion of common substance has to be totalitarian (RD, 29). In each case, he tries to answer the constitutive question and the normative question in the same way, but his concept of community may answer one without answering the other. Supposing that the nature of community is totalitarian, how can we say that it should be resisted? Conversely, if we assume it is right to resist totalitarianism, why would this tell us anything about the nature of community? It is true that these questions are often implicated in each other, but they are separable (RD, 39). Nancy cannot give good grounds for avoiding totalitarianism, because his normative view presupposes a constitutive view that excludes totalitarianism from the beginning. He does not defend community against totalitarianism so much as he declares that community is essentially non-totalitarian. He assumes that totalitarianism is conceptually impossible, though history shows it to be possible, not only conceptually, but actually.

May says that Nancy's normative position is self-defeating. Any community that wants to avoid totalitarianism by holding the non-totalitarian principle would become totalitarian by holding to that principle (RD, 41). It is not that Nancy has no non-totalitarian concept of community—he has—but an actual community could not accept it without denying the basis for accepting it; a decidedly non-totalitarian community would totalize itself as such. A community can be non-totalitarian, but it cannot decide to be non-totalitarian. Deciding on a non-totalitarian concept of community is as arbitrary as any other

decision. Community cannot give itself reasons for being one way or another. Any community is as good or bad as another (RD, 42). Nancy's confusion of constitutive and normative issues, is totalitarian in that it closes or collapses the distance between principles and action, nullifying the need for reasoned action in community. May argues that the idea of a philosophical safeguard against totalitarianism, that the answer to an ontological question and a political question are the same, is suspect (RD, 43).

While Nancy's main concern with the normative question is haunted by self-defeat, May thinks that there is no such problem with his constitutive position. Instead, the problem here is that he does not give any evidence for his idea about the nature of community. Given his critique of representation, it is not clear what he could offer by way of defense of his concept of community. His view is indefensible because he cannot give evidence for it and cannot generalize about community. In other words, he does not actually have a concept of community (RD, 44-46). For Nancy, not only are particular representations of community totalitarian, but the very project of representation is totalitarian. Yet this leaves him with no alternatives. Is his position self-defeating? May thinks it is not, on the constitutive level at least, because one need not have a definitive alternative to deny the validity of what exists. Even when we cannot define the nature of community, we can describe the activities that occur in community (RD, 32).

Whether Nancy does describe the activities in community is another matter. May says he betrays our ordinary experiences of community—family, friendship and so on—with his specialized sense of community. He does not say that Nancy must maintain our ordinary experiences against any analysis of community, but that Nancy claims that our ordinary

experiences have nothing to do with the analysis of community. The problem is not only that he does not explain community, but that he could not do so (RD, 47-48). At this point the constitutive problem confronts the normative problem. If Nancy explained community, it would end in what he considers a totalitarian account of how community occurs and what we should do about community, which is contrary to his aim. The constitutive project of representing the nature of community is limited by the normative project of avoiding representations of community (RD, 49). May suggests that Nancy need not consider all claims about the norms and nature of community as denials of a non-totalitarian community. Thus, having commitments or representations of community would not be by themselves totalitarian, but failing to recognize the provisional quality of those commitments and representations of community would be totalitarian. However, while we might accept that there is a basis for non-totalitarian commitments and representations, Nancy still resists making any judgements about the norms and nature of community, limiting the value of his concept of community (RD, 50).



## CONCLUSION

### THE USES AND ABUSES OF ANARCHISM FOR THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY

When we conceive society, we are missing a decent philosophy of the object. Here the object lies precisely outside of the relational circuits that determine society. . . . When we think about society, we are the victims of our images.

— Michel Serres, *Genesis*

#### 6.0. Recapitulation

This thesis is sparked by the variety of concepts of community in academic discourse. While the concept of community is duly discussed in other traditions of thought, nowhere is it as enigmatic as in the postmodern philosophy of Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy. In the Introduction I proposed this topic in order to understand why it is of such interest to these postmodernists in particular and to political philosophers in general, what they mean by the concept of community, how they relate it to notions of identity and justice, and whether it has coherence and reference in their work. I sought to present postmodernism as an alternative to traditional debates about community, and to assess the contributions and problems that it introduces to political philosophy.

In Chapter 2 I advanced the idea that the best theoretical framework for understanding the thought of Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy is anarchism, though they usually express some sort of commitment to communism. I showed that both classical and postmodern anarchism emphasize individual freedom in opposition to the totality of the state,

though freedom is not necessarily inimical to order altogether. For Ritter, Taylor and Crowder, order is spontaneous organized through social censure or the individual's own moral self-direction, but both of these options are possible only if governmental interference is reduced or removed so that small-scale communities may emerge. Levinas and Derrida continue this tradition insofar as they think that we have an absolute obligation to particular others prior to and in opposition to generalized obligations in the state or civil society, though they think that we still must try to translate that responsibility into state structures and legally regulated relations. Outlining anarchism in this manner makes it possible to see the anarchist characteristics in the thought of the three thinkers discussed in detail throughout this thesis.

Bataille (Chapter 3) thinks that the concept of community is important because the pressing problem in contemporary society is our inability to conceive of the individual's relation to the whole of life. To him, myth is the only way to depict and direct human destiny because it allows us to experience and express the sacred, which is concerned with the relation of humanity to the whole of life. Community is his focus insofar as it is involved in visions of the sacred, but it is always absent in that there is never an adequate representation of our belonging together. At stake is the sovereignty of the sacred, which would accord meaning to individual life as well as to social life outside of the sovereignty of the self-conscious subject or the self-constituted state. He is critical of fascism and democracy for their stress on individualism and support of capitalism, but he cannot completely embrace communism because it replaces the sacred's concern with the whole of life with the interest in limited human ends. Bataille emphasizes the heterological elements in community that are

not subservient to the homogenizing interests of state stability and social utility, and he is anarchistic to the extent that he seeks to develop a community around those elements that disrupt or destroy the state and civil society.

Blanchot (Chapter 4) is also interested in community to the extent that it opposes the state and civil society. 'Neutrality' is his watchword, referring to the excess of existence for which we cannot account, and characterizing the unavowable community. To him, every example of community demonstrates that community does not endure but rather arises and passes away spontaneously. Blanchot pits the anarchy of dissidents seeking justice against the anarchy of governments that are unable to use authority or misuse the authority to oppress people; he counsels insubordination against unjust states. While he tries to resist totalitarian tendencies through a withdrawal into literature, his approach is problematic because it leaves little basis for judging political options. This is especially clear with his emphasis on passive responsibility, which requires we accept an absolute obligation to particular others to the detriment or denial of all political interpretations of general obligation.

Nancy (Chapter 5) reacts against both tendencies represented by Bataille and Blanchot—the tendency to create ritualistic communities, and the tendency to withdraw into literature. The idea of 'the political' as an arena of reflection in which community is at stake, in opposition to 'politics' where community is settled along party lines, allows him to make the concept of community central to political debate and discussion. The basis of this move is his ontological approach in which community is considered as the principle of life rather than an ontic approach in which actual communities are evaluated and selected. However,

his ontological orientation, which claims that existence is communal, renders him unable to distinguish normatively between the positions he wants to avoid and those he wants to support. Nancy's anarchistic analysis of the totalitarian tendencies in states almost leads him to attack all states as totalitarian. He seeks the dissolution of state sovereignty under the law of the world and the end of state-sponsored justice within a global network which produces multiple meanings of universal justice.

### **6.1. Partial Anarchism**

To advance my argument that anarchism is a suitable framework for understanding the thought of Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy, I gave a positive picture of the traditions of classical anarchism and postmodern anarchism. From classical anarchism we understand the interplay of freedom and order, whether we adopt the perspective of negative freedom within social constraints or the positive freedom of moral self-direction. The idea of communal individuality, that individuality is best developed in spontaneously emergent communities, and that it only occurs if the government's influence on individuals is removed or weakened, is also important. From postmodern anarchism we have the idea of an absolute responsibility which befalls us before our conception and choice of generalized obligations, though attempts must be made to translate it into the legal system of states. Related to this is the idea that some set themselves against the state in order to draw attention to its injustice, though this position depends on an appeal to universal law. All of these ideas pertain to what is called partial rather than complete anarchy, because they do not imply that the absolute absence of order is possible or desirable for the development of freedom, but that freedom

usually is and should be limited by order; whether order is based on the pressures of social censure or an appeal to universal justice is not important, as long as it is not the state.

The anarchistic characteristic of Bataille's thought is evident in his emphasis on the effervescent and elective communities that exist within long-standing traditional communities. The smaller communities in which he is most interested are founded on the sacred and develop a vision of social unity that threatens the profane realm of disintegrated societies. He insists that there is a sacred sovereignty above and beyond state sovereignty. However, the limit of anarchism is apparent when he focuses on the unproductive activity that undermines the value of utility in the state and civil society, because unproductive activity cannot occur alone, but it is parasitic on production in the rest of the state and civil society. While smaller communities devoted to unproductive activity may try to subvert the ruling order, that they have subversive power at all depends on the conservative existence of the ruling order and their parasitic relation to the regular functioning of society. A community cannot be centered on an activity so unproductive as to undermine the community that is devoted to it.

Blanchot's references to anarchism get stronger through the course of his career. In his earlier work he considers anarchy justified as a response to the anarchy of those states that either relinquish their responsibility to provide order or oppress people under a restrictive order. This anarchy is partial rather than complete, an activity that attempts to reform stable institutions. Smaller communities might threaten the order of society, but they still exist within it. He later claims that smaller communities are not stable locations for threatening social order because they must not endure either. This is an unnecessarily

negative view. What is the point of community as an alternative to the state and civil society, if it is not meant to last? There are points in his work where we get the impression that because community cannot exist, then the other relations or institution which community is meant to challenge cannot exist either, which is just not true.

Nancy is willing to work within the context of existing institutions to rethink the relation of community to the state and civil society in the postmodern condition. Among my principal authors, he most exemplifies the tradition of natural law in his ontological orientation to community as the principle of existence itself. While he stresses the law of the world as an alternative to the sovereignty of states, he does not say anything about what is expected of us specifically. If we are to accept the binding obligation of global law, much more is required to articulate clearly what we should do in view of this sovereignty. Otherwise, we should reject it as a mystery. Why take ecotechnics seriously as an alternative to present political options, if it never resolves into an order, but continually churns out multiple meanings, if it cannot coalesce into some sort of global legislature, but challenges all international institutions?

To the extent that Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy incorporate ideas from the traditions of classical anarchism and postmodern anarchism into their work, they are partial anarchists, because none of them reject order altogether. They do not want the absolute absence of sovereignty, but suggest that state sovereignty is problematic. It is perhaps more accurate to say that their anarchism promotes the creation of small, self-governed communities outside or even within the state, whose functions and effects are opposed to or other than the state. To them, anarchy does not result in or is not the result of the withering away of the state, but

the anarchy of responsibility exists before the state and constantly challenges its justice at the same time as it calls for the state to extend itself into the world and do justice. Certainly they take issue with the status of the state as a stable institution. Their contribution to political philosophy is to question the significance of sovereign states in a globalizing world, as well as the importance of local legal systems in the drive to universal justice.

However, there are points where their work moves from partial to complete anarchy. The concept of community is used critically by Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy as their tool for dismantling the state and civil society, but the swath of their criticism is too wide. They go too far in questioning all stable institutions. They take pride in the democratic ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, but they seem to have little respect for the institutions that actually protect or promote them. They leave themselves with nothing to stand on in their opposition to the state. To them, community is the sort of relation that interrupts the totalitarian tendencies of the state, but it does so because it is also the sort of relation that undermines its own existence as a social totality. This reveals the paradox of their anarchistic approach to the concept of community. Slavoj Žižek claims that postmodern thinkers of their sort do not retreat the political but offers a reduction of the political when he characterizes them as ‘dispersionists’ who “condemn politics as unifying, totalitarian, violent, and so on, and assume the position of ethical critics who reveal (or voice) the ethical Wrong or Evil committed by politics, without engaging in an alternative political project.”<sup>1</sup>

Anarchism has value when it is an antagonistic activity that troubles into self-

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<sup>1</sup>Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 171-172.

reflection and self-renewal those institutions that claim to uphold justice but fall short of their goal, or tries to remove institutions that openly oppress people. There are aspects of anarchism that already are or could become part of our political vocabulary: that those who are outlaws with respect to the laws of the land uphold a universal justice; that the appeal to universal justice need not involve a transcendent entity, but may instead be the realization of our potential. There is much to recommend partial anarchism as a part of our present or projected system of justice. However, if anarchism promotes complete anarchy, the absence of all rules, which it need not, its commendable qualities disappear. The most important idea of anarchism is that the achievement of universal justice is beyond any particular interpretation and administration of justice. Yet one cannot establish or encourage a system which could achieve universal justice on the basis of anarchism alone. The attempt to do so reveals the self-contradiction of an anarchism left to its own devices, because its principles and practices mean either that it cannot set up lasting institutions, or that it would have to submit to the internal or external limitations that it rejects as unjust.

Anarchism is the essence of community in the borderland between the instances of concrete communities. It is both the possibility and impossibility of community. That is, anarchism is communistic because its goal is to create communities, but completely anarchistic communities cannot exist because they would destroy themselves. If anarchism were to completely occupy the political sphere, it would be a self-defeating in principle and in practice. Anarchism remains in an antagonistic relation to existing institutions; an anarchism which was an order would deny its antagonistic nature. Anarchy is only an instant in community—the flash of freedom that disrupts the institutions of the state but promises



a future solidarity, if not outside the state, at least beside the state. Anarchism must realize its limitations and take into account the persistence and positive value of institutions.

## **6.2. Anarchy and Democracy**

By arguing for partial rather than complete anarchy, I suggest that some of the ideas found in anarchism could find a place in democracies which foster the healthy struggle for power and a strong sense of their own contingency. The inability of Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy to accept this possibility is a shortcoming of their thought. It is strange that Bataille does not think that democracy is the most heterological state; he is critical of democracy for being monocephalic instead of bi-cephalic or poly-cephalic. Blanchot's criticism of democracy characterizes his earlier work, where he identifies democracy with a parliamentary government under duress. Nancy accepts democracy as a counterfoil to totalitarianism, though he does not embrace it as a form of government, and it is unclear whether this is because he dislikes democracy itself or distrusts what democracy has become. However, none of these thinkers are absolutely adverse to democracy. During the inter-war period Bataille was involved with the Democratic Communist Group, and Blanchot's contribution to a collection of essays calling for the end of apartheid contains a defense of democracy so devoid of double-talk that one hardly knows how to take it. Nancy is most amenable to democracy, expanding its parameters and avoiding its pitfalls.

The possibility of considering anarchism as an aspect rather than antithesis of democracy is opened by Claude Lefort's thought. He claims that totalitarianism is a response to the problems posed by the development of modern democracy. The democratic revolution

freed individuals from monarchy, but the destruction of the body of the king caused the ‘disincorporation’ of individuals, meaning that there was no principle of social unity. Totalitarianism is a short-cut constitution of the ‘body politic’ that provides a principle of social unity.<sup>2</sup> The symbolic emptiness of sovereignty can be reduced to particular representations of power. In democracy power is legitimated by and belongs to the people, but it is an empty space which no one can occupy without courting totalitarianism.

Democracy combines these two apparently contradictory principles: on the one hand, power emanates from the people; on the other, it is the power of nobody. And democracy thrives on this contradiction. Whenever the latter risks being resolved or is resolved, democracy is either close to destruction or already destroyed. (PF, 279)

There are two extreme forms of the ‘resolution’ of the democratic contradiction. If the place of power is entirely empty, meaning that there is no legitimate government but only individuals with private interests, then the state and civil society disappear under the privatization of interests that compete to dominate politically. If the place of power is filled, meaning that there is total legitimacy of government because power is appropriated by a party that identifies itself with the people, then the distinction between the state and civil society collapses and the political dominates all private interests. The first corresponds to the procedures of capitalism, the second to the oppression of totalitarianism (PF, 280).

Two things about Lefort’s definition of democracy are significant to anarchism—indeterminacy with respect to power, and uncertainty with respect to social life. It is possible to see these features of democracy as aspects of anarchism, or at least of a

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<sup>2</sup>Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 303; cited hereafter as PF.

democratic anarchism. Like democracy, anarchism seeks the lack of political specialization and concentration of power. The point is not to say that democracy and anarchism are equally valid, but to suggest that we can have indeterminacy and uncertainty in politics without denying the value of democracy, because some of these anarchistic qualities are included in democracy. That Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy do not readily admit this cuts them off from more appropriate political positions, and it is a shortcoming of their thought, especially compared to other postmodernists who defend democracy in terms of a hegemonic order that gives vent to antagonistic forces in society.<sup>3</sup>

The discomfort of Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy with democracy is related to other problems with their thought—that they have a defective idea of freedom, and that they ignore the danger of statelessness. They either do not recognize or give no credence to the fact that freedom is possible only in concrete communities whose members, individually or collectively, take the trouble to ensure the rights of other members. Yet they cannot accept this view of freedom, if they wanted to, because their concepts of community are problematic. Their concepts of community are of such an effervescent and elusive nature that they cannot sustain real freedom. They deny the notion of rights and civil liberties as an acquiescence to oppression under the capitalist system. This reflects a very narrow view, since rights and civil liberties could be a challenge to the capitalist system. It is an all-or-nothing attitude that rejects as totalitarian the institutions that might protect freedom, but the

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<sup>3</sup>There is an increasingly positive appreciation of democracy in contemporary political philosophy from France. See Mark Lilla, ed., *New French Thought: Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). The idea of ‘radical democracy’ is the focus of work by Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and others.

rejection of those institutions actually characterizes totalitarianism and causes the loss of freedom.

Hannah Arendt warns us to be careful about freedom. According to her, revolutions only properly apply to changes in civil liberties within the public space, but become self-contradictory when they attempt to found freedom metaphysically outside of all concrete contexts, because they cannot create the institutions needed to guarantee it. Revolutions should limit themselves to providing civil liberties, and realize that freedom is never given to humanity as such.<sup>4</sup> On such an account, true revolutions are democratic; when revolutions repress civil liberties to establish stable societies, they are tyrannical, and when revolutions shift freedom from concrete civil liberties to something metaphysical that leaves us vulnerable to abuses, they are totalitarian. In this sense, anarchism becomes anti-democratic to the extent that it reaches for a radical freedom beyond concrete freedom or rejects civil liberties for a universal ideal that cannot protect peoples' rights.

Arendt's analysis is applicable to anarchists because they actively seek the condition of statelessness. She cautions against the revolutionary triumph of abstract inalienable rights of humanity over the specific and concrete rights granted to particular people by nations or states, because such rights cannot be respected or protected except by global institutions, which have proven ineffective when they have existed at all.<sup>5</sup> This is an implication of her idea that freedom makes sense only in a concrete community because it is a political rather

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<sup>4</sup>Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 235.

<sup>5</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 299; cited hereafter as OT.

than personal matter. She says that the identity between human freedom and shared frameworks, between the protection of a person's rights and collective communities, became obvious when millions of stateless people lost those rights and could not regain them in the unstable situation after World War II: "Not the loss of specific rights, then, but the loss of a community willing and able to guarantee any right whatsoever, has been the calamity which has befallen ever-increasing numbers of people" (OT, 297).

According to Arendt, when stateless people lose their rights they are relegated to mere existents who try to satisfy the basic necessities of life. In other words, stateless people are purely private individuals in the sense that they are no longer included as subjects or objects of public concern in a particular state. They can neither participate nor appear in decisions of common interest. It is because of their status as mere existents that they are considered 'alien' and a threat to the stability and equality established by political organizations (OT, 301). Political life does not exist where a shared world is lacking. Stateless people are a target for totalitarian domination and destruction, whether their statelessness is ready-made or artificially created, because they are radically individualized according to the qualities of human nature that cannot be changed by political practice and must therefore be eradicated. Furthermore, their vulnerability is increased because they are armed only with the abstract rights of humanity which oblige no nation to act on their behalf.

These points are relevant to my criticism of the anarchism of Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy because Arendt raises serious issues about radical freedom and the danger of statelessness. She shows how revolutions face a self-contradiction: the desire for radical freedom runs up against the fact that it must limit itself to civil liberties and sustain itself

with stable institutions. She claims that this self-contradiction means revolutions must be more modest, but anarchists take it as evidence of the evils of institutions and as an endorsement of statelessness. The danger of statelessness is that it leaves itself vulnerable to totalitarianism, and as anarchism seeks statelessness, it can actually create the conditions for totalitarianism. The lack of institutions leaves people without protection from oppression, and the lack of institutions can become an instrument of oppression. This is a concern for those who leave or are forced out of states as well as those within states ruled illegitimately. It is also a concern for democracies as globalization puts states, especially new or weaker ones, at the mercy of economic forces 'controlled' by corporations that are not accountable to the electorate. Anarchists fail to recognize the negative effects of statelessness or feel that the benefits outweigh the costs. Though they seek statelessness to avoid authoritarian governments, it is possible that statelessness is totalitarian in ways that are harder to address. To whom do dissenters turn if they are persecuted by the majority in a stateless society? Is there anything in anarchism that protects people against the tyranny of public opinion?

Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy cannot provide adequate answers to these questions, because they have an unsatisfactory concept of community. The most they offer is the faith that these issues would not arise, or that if they did, they would be solved through reference to the higher order of sacred sovereignty, neutrality, or the law of the world, though the validity of this sort of reference is precisely at stake in anarchism. If they are going to argue against the state as an oppressive or outmoded institution, then they require more robust and better described concepts of community. As anarchists, the burden of this responsibility falls mostly to them. To the extent that their concepts of community do not offer real alternatives

to the state, their contributions to political philosophy are limited.

### **6.3. Should We Abandon the Anarchistic Concept of Community?**

Thus there are several problems with the political philosophy of Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy. It is problematic to the extent that they stray from partial anarchy within the context of established or emerging institutions into a complete anarchy that destroys institutions altogether. It is one thing to reject the state as a negative influence on individuals and to desire its destruction in order to free individuals for moral self-direction; it is something else to say that in there should be no organized social relations because they are inherently and perniciously totalitarian. This characteristic of their thought helps to explain why they do not accord credit to democracy when it might be the system of government that brooks the crisis and challenge that anarchism brings to politics. Democracy provides the openness and indeterminacy that appeals to anarchists without the self-destructiveness of complete anarchism, but they do not take advantage of this possibility. Their denial of democracy is perhaps a symptom of their inability to accept that real freedom is secured only in institutions that protect the rights of people, as well as, perhaps, their gross underestimate of the danger of statelessness. They are critical of rights-talk and dismissive of debates about civil liberties as an acquiescence to corrupt governments, but they fail to recognize that statelessness, as much as a strong state, can lead to the totalitarianism they want to avoid. This makes their concepts of community untrustworthy. These are particularly pressing problems for those who place emphasis on anarchistic communities as alternatives to the state and civil society.

Yet Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy are unable or unwilling to be clearer about their alternatives. At stake in their thought is the possibility of an analysis and language adequate to the strange existential status of community. There is something to which the word 'community' obliquely refers in their work; they do not doubt that community exists, but they deny that it exists in any actual community. They insist on an ontological notion of community, whereby community is not the quality of things, but the existence of things. To them, the important point is not that community exists, but that existence is community. This might move them towards the claim that community is the essence of existence, but that is what they try to avoid. This leads to the following dilemma: on the one hand, community is not a separate property that can or cannot be attributed to social relations; on the other hand, community cannot be understood apart from social relations. The lack of a resolution to this dilemma partly explains the difficulty we have encountered in understanding their work.

I think it best not to treat the anarchistic concept of community as of a piece, but to take what is sound and develop it. We need not abandon the anarchistic concept of community but should draw attention to the limited legitimacy of the concept of community in the postmodern condition. The lesson to be learned from Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy is that the concept community cannot play a grounding role in a political philosophy for today's world. This is not to say that it is unimportant, but that it is not the most important. The concept of community still has a role to play, but it must be more modest. The concept of community is a touchstone for discussions about social life but it does not name the substance of our relations together. Perhaps the importance of anarchism is that it does not force us to one or other side of the false dichotomy between the foundational and fictional



status of the concept of community.

The ubiquity of the concept of community in quotidian and academic discourse tells us that there is something special about it. Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy have shown that the desire for community endures despite or due to the dissipation of other forms of social relation. Their work is marked by growing dissatisfaction with definitions of community that reduce it to unity or totality, and the notions of identity and justice that accompany them. They call forth concepts of community that are particular and provisional but still extend benefits and entreat obligations. The value of anarchism for political philosophy is as something between the mythic unity of the state and the loose bonds of civil society. Though some people claim that without a strong concept of community we have no social relations worthy of the term, this is just not true. It is likely that a fragile concept of community is all we can hope for, and due to this fragility we need to recognize ourselves and respond to others more conscientiously. However, we must be able to recognize community when it does exist, and work towards it when it does not. Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy shows us that the old concepts of community are problematic, but their anarchist approach prevents them from constructing significant and consistent alternatives. While we no longer expect the concept of community to solve everything, it remains an important ideal.

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