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Conloquium

To Roberto Esposito's title *Communitas* I respond with another title in Latin (which is after all the most common language between Italian and French), and we find ourselves together here in the space of the *common*. This language choice also enables Esposito to distance himself on principle from the word "community" (or *comunità*), and to keep at a distance the temptations of facile thought or the risks of misinterpretation which this word insidiously spreads around itself, as has been evident for some time now.

I respond with the word *conloquium*, for which I have chosen the most classic form, that of Caesar or of Cicero (*conloquia amicorum absentium* [conversations with absent friends], as in all the texts), to avoid the academic resonance of the word "colloquium" and in order to indicate that if I play the role of preface-writer here, it is not to introduce a book, or to a book, which like any genuinely worthy book introduces itself, but in order to continue with Esposito, and by way of him along with several others, an exchange (a *communicatio*, a *commercium*, a *commentarium* [a sharing, an exchange of goods, a concentration of thought(s)]) which is already old but not yet aged, and which necessarily concerns us. I take these words in their strongest sense since it is a matter of nothing less than of all of *us* and of what is *between us*.

Communitas deploys a work that has been in progress for at least fifteen years. I am speaking not only of Esposito's own work—whose progress, punctuated by several other books (especially *Categorie dell'impolitico*) has forged a single path up to the present—but of work carried out collectively, in common (as we will quickly and provisionally call it) at first in Europe (specifically in Italy and in France) then elsewhere in the world (and *on* the world). This work is devoted to the question of what is called "community" or, better yet and as prompted by these works, "being-in-common" or "being-together."

If I say that Esposito deploys this work, I certainly do not mean that he accomplishes and finishes it. Far from it; he instead helps relaunch it from the beginning. With the large number of references deployed in his book, he shows the magnitude of the task of thinking that has been imposed on all of us in recent decades. It was a matter of, simultaneously, rereading otherwise certain decisive moments of our tradition (among others, Rousseau, Hegel, Marx,

Husserl, Heidegger, Arendt, and Bataille) and in various concordant and discordant ways engaging in thinking through what will become of our common existence (which is to say our existence itself).

This work of thinking is imposed on us by a terrible motif that the history of our (because it is *ours*) century holds out to us incessantly, to the point that the memory of it is as tiring as it is inevitable. Humanity—but first of all in Europe—has shown an unsuspected talent for self-destruction, in the name of community. Humanity has manifested this talent both on the order of quantity (but to a degree that the expressions “extermination” or “mass destruction” convert the numbers into absolutes or infinities) and on the order of ideas or values. Humanity has torn out from “mankind” [*l’homme*] itself the fragile veins, so recent after all and whose worth was based on fragility.

In fact, the community of mankind has left itself to its own devices, untying itself from the religious bonds that had moreover given it its qualities (hierarchical, hieratic, and seized with fear) and opening up a history of the necessarily collective [*commune*] self-production of humanity, both generic and singular. Everything happened as if history could not wait for itself, as if it could not defer the production of the figure to come and hurried to mint it like a pre-given prototype, a symbol available to serve as general equivalent [*commune measure*].

The work of death (in destruction stealing death itself, its dignity) was carried out in the name of the community (either that of a self-constituted people or race, or of a self-crafted humanity¹): this is really what ended all possibility of a grounding in any *given* whatsoever of the common being (blood, substance, filiation, essence, origin, nature, consecration, election, organic or mystical identity). In truth it is even what ended the possibility of thinking a *common being* according to any model whatsoever of a “being” in general. The being-in-common beyond the being thought of as identity, as state, and as subject; the being-in-common affecting the being itself in the depths of its ontological texture: such was the task brought to light.

As we know all too well, the frightening appeal to community as a given never ceases to unleash massacres which seem to be organized within a world order whose sanctioned actions, when they are not simply ineffective, may rightfully appear as the perverse effects of a faceless domination that pits purported identities against each other.

Devastating current events—Bosnia, Kosovo, Congo, Timor, Chechnya, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Ireland, Corsica;

intercommunitarian violence in India, Indonesia, Africa, etcetera—reveal that we have been incapable of dismantling or discouraging appeals to communitarian essences, and have instead exacerbated them. We have brought communitarian intensities, with their regimes and distinctions, to the point of incandescence as a result of the indistinction of a global process in which infinite generality seems to prevail over any defined coexistence. This means that we have not yet been able to grasp or invent a decidedly other articulation and constitution out of the being-in-common.

The demand thus created has set in motion the work of which I was speaking, work which is decidedly common but not collective (although over the years there have been numerous interactions and exchanges which can be followed in Esposito's dense network of cross-references, to which one could still add). Rather, this work is imposed on all of *us together* (without us exactly knowing what is the "together" thinking about an "epoch") to have to concern ourselves with the possibility of being, precisely, together and to say "we" at the very moment when this possibility seems to vanish in a "one" or an anonymous "I," both equally monstrous and in fact inextricably intertwined.

How to say "we" otherwise than as a "one" (= everyone and no one) and otherwise than as an "I" (= a single person, which is still no one)? How then to be in common without creating what an entire tradition (but after all a recent tradition, which is to say one stemming from the West, which is finishing itself off by expanding) calls a community (a body of identity, an intensity of property, an intimacy of nature)?

It is obvious that *we* are together, or else there would be no one to read this, which would not even be written, much less *published* and thus *communicated*. It is obvious that *we* exist inseparably from our society, if *one* understands by this neither our organizations nor our institutions, but rather our *sociation*, which is certainly something more and something other than an association (a contract, a convention, a grouping, a collective, or a collection). Sociation is a coexisting condition that is coessential to *us*. It is even obvious that the statement "we exist inseparably from our societies" is still highly inadequate because it in fact dissociates *us* (in which we each understand each other separately) from *society*. Instead it is precisely a matter of stating that the two go together, absolutely. It is therefore obvious that there is for *us* a deep semantic and pragmatic hesitation in the pronouncement of a "we," instantaneously vaporized or on the contrary cemented.

And yet there remains, underlying and more or less latent and deaf, the obviousness of our being-together, a self-evidence that is ours and precedes all other obviousness insofar as the social existence of Descartes logically and chronologically precedes the possibility of enunciating *ego sum*. Moreover, in being enunciated, *ego sum* is at least enunciated to an other (at least to an other in oneself than oneself), and so much so that, shall we say, any *ego sum* is an *ego cum* (or *mecum*, or *nobiscum*). This is evident and it is evident to *us*.

But perhaps this obviousness is never as present nor as well-known as when we do not think about it, such that for Descartes it was a matter of the union of the body and soul that we know perfectly well through daily existence and without having to show it, much less of course to demonstrate it. We are together and it is only there or thus that we can say “I.” I would not say “I” if I were alone (otherwise stated, *we* would not say “I” if *we* were *alone*), since if I were alone I would have nothing from which to differentiate myself. If I differentiate myself—if we differentiate ourselves—it is because we are several, by which we should understand “to be several” with distributive value and at the same time with the same value as in “being *of* the world.”

If I differentiate myself, it is *from* [*d’avec*] others.² In French *d’avec*³ is a remarkable expression: one separates oneself from or *d’avec* someone just as one discerns good from evil, which is to say that one deviates from a proximity but this deviation supposes the proximity within which the deviation or distinction definitively takes place. There is a proximity of the proximity and of the deviation. The German *mit* and English *with*, although of another provenance, have similar characteristics which already in large part belonged to the Latin *cum*.⁴ *With* [*avec*] in general lends itself to marking all sorts of complex and mobile proximities,⁵ far from being reduced to mere juxtaposition (which in itself is no doubt already not indifferent). To speak with, to enter into marriage with, to break up with, to become angry with, to compare with, to identify with, to play with (which has more than one meaning), to dine with (and one can dine with someone while celebrating with risotto), to rise with the dawn, to forget with time. It is always a proximity, not only a brushing against but a reciprocal action, an exchange, a relation of more or less mutual exposure. It is not pure concomitance. Saying “with the close of the day come other ideas” is not the same as saying “at the close of the day come other ideas.”

Cum links (if it is a link) or joins (if it is a joint, a yoke, a harness) the *munus* of the *communis*, whose logic or semantic charge Esposito so well identified and developed. This is the springboard

for the entire book: it is the sharing of a charge, a duty, or a task, rather than the community of a substance. The being-in-common is defined and constituted by a charge, and in the final analysis it is in charge of nothing other than the *cum* itself. We are charged with our *with*, which is to say with *us*. This does not mean that we must rush to understand this as something like “responsibility of the community,” or “the town” or “the people,” etcetera. This means that we have as a charge, as a task—but we might as well say “to live” and “to be”—the *with* or the *between* in which we have our existence, which is to say at once our place or milieu and that to which and by which we *exist* in the strongest sense. In other words, we are *exposed*.

Cum is an exhibitor, placing us in front of one another, delivering us up to one another, playing us against one another, and delivering us all together to that which Esposito (aptly named) in the end calls “experience”: that which is nothing more than being with.

Cum brings together or puts together, but it is neither a mixer, nor an assembler, nor a mediator, nor a collector. It is a *regard* [*égard*] as in when “with” also means “in regard to”: “to be on good or bad terms with someone,” “to be or not to be at peace with oneself.” This sense of *regard* (which could also be a *toward*—“disposed toward someone”—a being-turned-toward) is a taking into account, an observation, a concern (but not necessarily in the sense of deference). It is a showing of attention or of interest, also a surveillance, indeed a mistrust or circumspection or even inspection. It can also be a simple registering, but less than a taking into account, a taking note of, a having-to-do-with (this passerby that I meet, for example).

One should certainly not magnify being-together. One of the discretely perverse effects of the recent work on community has been the occasional revival of a certain Christian and humanist emphasis on “sharing,” “exchange,” or “others,” but this is precisely what led Esposito to wish to *immunize* or relieve us from communitarian or communitarist thoughts. Being-together is a condition before becoming a value (or counter-value), and if it must be a value it can only be one in the sense of that which cannot be evaluated, that which surpasses all evaluation. This instead raises the question of how to think the condition of being-together other than as derived from a subject, individual or collective, and on the contrary to think no “subject” without starting from and in this condition. Being-together is not a together of being-subjects, nor is it itself a subject. This means that it does not come back to itself, even though it goes nowhere else.

As Esposito suggests, this no doubt calls for thinking that the “with” is nothing, neither substance nor in-itself-for-itself. Nonetheless this “nothing” is not exactly nothing, but something that is not a thing in the sense of “placed-present-somewhere.” It is not in a place, since it is rather the place itself, the capacity to be there of something or rather of some things and somebodies, that is to say the capacity to be found there *with* each other or *among* each other, the *with* or *among* being nothing other than the place itself, the milieu or world of existence.

Such a place is called *sense* [meaning, direction, logic]. Being-with is to make sense, to be in the sense of or according to the sense. This “sense” is not at all a vector oriented toward the epiphany of a signification, but is rather the circulation of the proximity in its own deviation and in the deviation of its proximity, the closer and closer return or rebound by which a world makes a world, something other than a pile or null point. The “nothing” of sense is no more a nonsense (simple reversal of an epiphanic signification) than a superessence postulated in the mode of a negative theology. It indicates not a mystical nothingness but simply the *ex* that *creates* the exposition of existence. Not nothing = no thing, but nothing = the very thing of passing and of sharing, among us, from us to us, from the world to the world.

Thus the *Mitsein* or better yet the *Mitdasein* whose analysis Heidegger eluded or emptied out (Esposito discusses this) should not be understood as a “being there with” (in the room, in a train, in life) but rather as a being-with-*da*, which is to say in the open, thus always elsewhere, in a sense (and in accordance with *Being and Time*). Being modalized *mit-da*—perhaps its only modalization but at the same time indefinitely plural—is nothing other than a being sharing or dividing itself into shares according to the *da* which is forced to designate the “open,” the “open” of the ex-posed. Being-with is thus the same thing as being-open. *Dasein*—surely to be open, to be exposed, but in being the opening itself or the exposition, according to what could be given as the general axiom of this thought: to be “itself” is to expose *oneself*, which is to say to expose *itself*. *Mitdasein* would thus be a sort of stammering or tautology of thought, concealing everything that is difficult to think: being-with *or* being-open *or* being-opening *or* just-plain-being. Or else (forgive me for insisting so emphatically) to be open to the with while being with or in the open. But in any case a *with* that is nothing but the effect of an *open* and an *open* that is nothing but the effect of a *with*. Finally, an *open / with* that is not added to “being,” that does not predicate it, but that is on the contrary the “subject,” a subject without substance or support, with no support other than a rapport. Which again is

to say an *open / with* that affects “being,” that opens it itself or that makes its opening, that of a circulation of sense.

But here again we must ceaselessly beware of the pious resonances of the “open” as well as of those of “community.” “Open” is neither simply nor primarily generosity, warmth of welcome, and prodigality of the gift, but principally the condition of coexistence of finite singularities *among* which—alongside, beside, on the edge of, between “inside” and “outside”—the possibility of sense circulates indefinitely.

Translated by Janell Watson.

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Notes

1. Neither must we cease emphasizing the dissymmetry between, on the one hand, fascisms which proceed from an affirmation of the essence of the community, and, on the other hand, communisms which declare the community to be a *praxis* and not a substance. No degree of self-deceit can suppress this difference. Likewise there is no reason to forget the numbers of victims (nor the substantialist, communitarist, and racist propositions concealed here and there in so-called real communism).

2. The others are moreover not only other humans, but other beings [*étants*] in general. There is a philosophy of nature, if one can still call it that, that remains to be done, backwards and forwards, like a philosophy of coexistence. Some are thinking about it (for example, Marianne Thornat is working on a doctoral dissertation along these lines).

3. [*Avec* means “with”; *d’avec* is used to differentiate or distinguish something from something else. —Trans.]

4. These are also found in part of the values of the Greek *meta*, from which is sometimes derived the German *mit*, and whose first meaning is “in the middle of,” “between.” “*Between us*” is another thought-provoking expression, whereas other values are found in *sun* which, precisely, allows for *xuô*, to touch (to rub, to scrape, to scratch). In the “with” there is contact or at least a proximity or virtuality of contact, although the contact itself is already on the order of the near/distant, of the deviation that remains at the heart of the near. As for *koinos* (“common” in Greek; cf. in Esposito the *koinonia* of Aristotle), either it is associated with the Western *co*-in general (to which is also sometimes associated the Germanic prefix *ge-*, with a conjunctive or collective value that is found in *gemein*, where *mein*, in contrast, is not related to *munus*) or to the Homeric Greek *keiôn*, “splitting, dividing.” There is always conjunction and disjunction, disjunction, reuniting *with* division, near *with* far, *Concordia discors* and unsociable sociability. This disjunction is our problem at least since Rousseau, insists Esposito.

5. The word comes from *apud hoc*, near that, and its first forms were *avoec*, *avaic*, *avuec*.

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