

L. ten Kate, J.-L. Nancy, 'Cum Revisited', in H. Oosterling, E. Ziarek (eds.), *Intermedialities*, 37-43, 185-186 Notes. © Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., Lanham, New York etc. 2010. appears by permission of the author and publisher). Appears by permission of the author and publisher.

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CHAPTER 3 “CUM” ... REVISITED: PRELIMINARIES TO THINKING THE INTERVAL¹

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I. The Autodestructive Community

In the name of “the community,” humanity – in particular in 20th century Europe – has shown an unexpected capacity to destroy itself. This destruction has been quantitative – mass extermination on such a scale that the very concept of quantity and of quantification was perverted and inverted into a quality: the quality of the unquantifiable, numbers becoming innumerable, becoming absolute, infinite figures. And at the same time this autodestruction has been qualitative, for the idea and the value of “humanity” and of “human nature” itself was destroyed, and its fragile texture being torn up; precisely because of this, human singularities were reduced to numbers, quality being perverted and inverted into quantity.

Nevertheless, the multiform history of the community, whether in its universal, global, or in its particular, local shape, should not be seen as some evil, disastrous deviation from the course of civilization; however stained it may have become, it is not an aberrance from normality but rather humanity’s and humanism’s less innocent, less ethereal side. One of the compelling questions of our time is whether the community *is* a place, a topos, of self-destruction humanity cannot avoid or eliminate. At least this presupposes that we must think the community as a “groundform” and not a side-effect of human existence. As soon as people are exposed to one another in a plurality – and what else could humanity be than precisely this reciprocal exposition of people and peoples? – “there is community”. But this fundamental form of community is not simply their product, nor their operation or “oeuvre”; it is not just the sum of individuals *having* something in common. It is a place where they, inadvertently, *are* in common, only to discover that this “in-common” cannot be controlled by them and so eludes them. Consequently, anything can happen, can take place in this strange place of the “inoperative community” (of “that” in a community which remains inoperative): peace and violence, order and disorder, cohesion and destruction.

Needless to say, if the community is this ambivalent place of a quantitative and qualitative destruction, of a destruction of numbers of humans as well as of the value of the “human”, it becomes impossible to appropriate, cherish and glorify such a

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place. The being-in-common is a condition and not a value (nor counter-value). The moral valorization of the in-common is one of the discreetly perverse effects of recent works on the community; it accompanies a certain christian or humanist emphasis on "sharing" ("*partage*"), "exchange", "the other", "intersubjectivity versus individualism", and a plea for the continuity of social and ideological traditions. In this sense contemporary "communitarianism" in ethics and philosophy should be treated as critically as possible. Even if the in-common were a value, it would be one that surpasses every evaluation. We are challenged to think this pre-ethical condition without deriving it from a subject, whether individual or collective. Advancing beyond any notion of intersubjectivity, we can only derive the subject from the in-common, not the reverse. First there is this strange topos, with all its ambivalent possibilities of destruction, and only from there the constitution of an ethical subject and the construction of a collective identity might be thought.²

Still, we wish to take a step further and ask: may not the "truth" of our time be that the community first of all *is* this topos where self-destruction and self-construction meet? Could this ambivalent structure be the essential event "happening" in the in-common? And if so, how and why?

II. The Autoproduktive Community

From a historical viewpoint, the community, at least since the beginning of modern times, has been left to its own fate and devices; it is left with itself and can only found and construe itself. It has released itself from the religious framework that gave hierarchic and hieratic consistency to the premodern community, subjecting it to a regime of fear.³ In this way, the community opened itself to a necessarily common history of *self-production*. With no substance, no sense left outside it (the Church, the Saints, the Gods) to produce and install it, the community had to look within itself for grounds and substances on which it could establish itself. It had to *be* its own fundament. Caught up in this strange double structure – to build oneself on... oneself – its substance became radically finite and contingent: whereas its authoritative, symbolic and identificational "centre" had become empty – had become the elusive, "inoperative" in-common typical of the modern community – this emptiness had to be filled time and again with self-produced substances.

So the modern autodestructive community is at the same time the autoproduktive community. That the community has to produce itself means that it will always already have destroyed itself. It is entangled in a violent and infinite spiral of production and destruction, where temporary, phantasmagoric substances alternate with each other in order to – desperately – fill up community's empty truth: that the topos of the in-common remains inappropriable. A logic of the *autos* is powering this movement of establishing a common, consistent and infinite self on this topos, but precisely because

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we are dealing here with a logic of *autoproduction*, it has to fail and destroy itself. That is to say, the community is fighting a losing battle: it cannot stop this turbulence of constant substantiation, unless it would stop being modern. It has to appropriate the in-common in order to become "community" in an operative sense, and, simultaneously, it cannot appropriate the in-common, for it would stop being "community". In the end, it is left with the discovery that it can never control its in-common – never control "itself". Therefore, it must destroy itself in order to produce itself. If we do not think and analyze this structure of failure inherent to the modern and "postmodern" community, it will be hard to understand the destructive disasters – the so-called loss of humanity – it has brought (and is still bringing) about in our time.

Hence, only the analysis of this structure of failure might give room to an "ontology" of the being-in-common that would problematize the logic of autosubstantiation by intensifying its predicament, and thus hint at a different conception of and insight into what is *between* "us." Following such a philosophical trajectory, one may well be better placed to think the *cum* determining our (tele)communication, the *inter* governing our intermedialities, in a time in which the world has become a place of the *medium* as well as a continuing medial event, connecting us, not to one another but first of all to the media themselves. In short, one may be better equipped to think the in-common that "we" are in – that we are. Such a problematization seems urgent. The operationalization of war and death in the previous and in the present century has indeed taken place in the name of the community – here that of a self-produced people or race, there that of a selfconstrued humanity. Precisely this development has made it impossible to simply rely on some given entity of the community (blood, substance, filiation, essence, origin, nature, consecration, election, organic or mystic identity): these entities are produced and again destroyed by themselves, and their only "entity" lies in their necessity to deny this. Well then, this denial of the failure that structures the modern community – being autoproduktive and autodestructive at the same time – is still very active, even dominant, in Europe's recent years: the fate of Bosnia and Kosovo, the rise of populism, but also the cry for reestablishing a democratic identity to be defended against "evil", are all examples of a new appeal to an unbroken and unequivocal *being common* and *having-in-common*.

However, in our view such an appeal is quite insufficient, and maybe even pointless and fruitless. We have to expose ourselves to the sense of the world and to the complex intermedialities that seem to regulate and deregulate it. Only from there can we return to the *problem* of our communities and the identities they claim. In other words, our task will be to defer the claim to what might be common to us, and to think the being-*in-common*, to think the *interval*. We hope to offer some philosophical preliminaries to such a thinking.

III. Thinking the Interval: *inter, cum*

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In Western music, the interval is the name for a combination of two notes played at the same time, thus creating a sound that we hear as a new note. The separate notes composing the interval are still audible, but at the same time something new has installed itself between them; it comes to our ears without being reduced directly to its elements. The interval "is" nothing: it is nothing without its elements, and still it is something different from its elements. It "is" in the way of an event. Precisely due to this precarious nature, the interval evaporates immediately after being heard. The minor third, the famous "blue note" having its origins in blues music, may serve as an example here.

Starting from this metaphor, and letting ourselves be inspired by it, we wish to raise the question whether the in-common we have articulated so far is characterized by this same structure of the interval. Two concepts should be of key importance in such an investigation: (1) the *inter*, the *intermedial* as a "third" topos between those communicating, between the I and its other; this concept designates the formal, "topological" structure of the in-common.

(2) the *cum* as the event of disjunction/conjunction, of distance/proximity between them; this event makes their "community" precarious, for in it the "being common" is produced and destroyed at the same time – mirroring the structure of failure of the modern "inoperative" communities we analyzed above. *Cum* would describe the dynamics of the in-common, asking what happens to "us" and to our being "us", what remains of "us" and what comes to "us".⁴

(1) Thinking the in-common means thinking it beyond those who are in this in-common; the community is not simply the "collection" of the communicators, nor is it a function of them. It is the interval between them, and this interval is irreducible to its "components". It "is" there in its strange, non-essential way as soon as its event brings people together, exposing them to one another. It is this "being there", this *da* that has to be conceptualized, analyzed and exemplified in our present societies. This "medium", this "medial" topos *between us* cannot be described as "*oeuvre*", nor as operation: it is neither the controlled *oeuvre* of – pre-existing – subjects entering into some sort of contract that can be canceled any time (the "contractualist" idea of the in-common), nor is it the uncontrolled *oeuvre* of a – pre-existing – unity fusing the subjects into a new Subject to which they happily give themselves away: Ethnos, Race, Religion, Culture, Civilization, all of them instances and substances of a common We (the "fusionalist" idea of the in-common).

The *inter* of the in-common, in short, should be thought beyond any logic of subjectivity. It is as a *third term* between the I and its other, between you and me, and between us; it installs itself as this "third" between us, and in doing so, decenters our subjectivity.⁴ Its "*oeuvre*" is precisely this "*désoeuvrement*", performed on and as the empty topos of the interval. For if the *inter* is not a subject or substance, if according to the logic of being it can only be a radical "nothing" (touching upon Bataille's idea of

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sovereignty), than it must be thought as a place, a space (topos), an area, however airy, a limit or a borderline.⁵

All this surely invites us to think the *inter* as a “nothing”: no substance whatsoever, no presence *an-sich-für-sich*. Even so this “nothing” is not exactly nothing: it is something that is not a thing, not a *Gegenstand* present in and as some specific spatiotemporal *Gegenwart*. It is not something-somewhere, on a topos; rather it is a topos itself. *Inter* is the capacity in and by which something, or rather some-things and some-ones “be there” – *da*. This being there means, more precisely, that those involved in it find themselves *among* or *inter* one another, the *inter* being nothing else than the topos proper, the “milieu” or the world in which beings exist. Needless to say, we come close here to Heidegger’s concepts of *Dasein* and *in-der-Welt-sein*, where a topology of the *zwischen* is also active.

Such a topos is called *sense*. Being *inter* one another as a formal designation of the condition of intermediality we nowadays live in, means: making sense. However, this “sense” is not a vector heading toward the epiphany of a meaning but the circulation of proximity in distance and of distance in proximity: the constant “rebound” of ever ongoing sense-events by which a world makes a world. Sense is something we live in or according to. Following its structure of an *inter*, sense is “nothing”. But this nothing is by no means nonsense (the simple reverse of epiphanic meaning) nor is it a super-essence as postulated by some traditions of negative theology: it does not indicate a mystical void but simply the *ex* that *makes possible* and *generates* the exposure of existence. This nothing is not “no thing” but the capacity proper in and by which the passage from us to us, “between us”, from the world to the world, can take place.

Consequently the *Mitsein* or rather the *Mitdasein* that Heidegger has formulated but avoided to analyze, should not be understood as a “being there with” (e.g. in the living room, in the train, in life), but as a “being-with *da*”. Yes, we are with one another, but this means first of all that we are with the topos of the *inter*, being-with being nothing else than being *on* this topos, than being *da*.⁶ Thus this being-with *da* is synonymous with being in the open, being always elsewhere.⁷

So the *da* is always *mit*: being-with – so Heidegger persists – is not simply the sum of several singularities (several *Dasein*) but the essential way in which being (*Sein*) gives itself. Here we meet one of the major innovations Heidegger has added to traditional ontology. Needless to say, with this attempt to think the *mit* as such, as an instance in itself and not as the sharing of properties and identities, Heidegger has entered a realm of powerful risks, as his political engagements in the 1930's demonstrate. This becomes particularly apparent if we realize that Heidegger’s next philosophical step has been to introduce the category of the people (*das Volk*). In the existential figuration of the people the *mit* as such would achieve its truth, and it is *as* people that the *Dasein-as-Mitsein* would realize its possibilities to make history.

(2) Thinking the in-common as the interval articulated above, means it is a topos where “communication” becomes problematic and ambivalent: it cannot be aborted as if it

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were a choice (we always already communicate), but neither can it succeed. In a way, communication on and as this topos just leads us nowhere: it holds us in the intensity-without-intentionality of a never-ending event that turns "communication" into the ambivalence of disjunction/conjunction. It is the ambivalence of our second key concept: *cum*.

Being in-common, being in the in-common means that "we" – decentered as subjects by this elusive *tertium* of the interval – are brought together and separated at the same time. It is this double bind of our "we", of the *cum* of any community, that is to be thought.

In the etymology of this little word *cum* and of its successors in modern Western languages one already finds the traces of the double bind mentioned above.

The French word *d'avec* is a remarkable word. It means "from" – like in "to separate from" – but the opposite of "from", "with", is present in the term just as well: *d'avec*, "from-with". If we distinguish or separate ourselves *d'avec* someone, we actually leave some proximity, but this moving away presupposes the proximity *in which* the separation or the distinction takes place. From-with, with-without, with-out: the "with" and the "without" belong to the same movement or event. So one might conclude there is a proximity of – between – proximity and distance. Whereas *d'avec* pinpoints almosts literally the ambivalence of communication, the French *avec* ("with"⁸) incorporates the same double bind more implicitly and generally, like the German *mit* and the English *with*. It designates all kinds of complex and mobile proximities that cannot be reduced to simple juxtapositions: to chat with, to be in love with, to be angry with, to compare with, to identify with, to be fed up with... It is always a proximity consisting of a reciprocal action, of an exchange, of mutual exposure, rather than of a static approaching each other.

The ambivalence of *cum* resounds not only in the modern languages; one discovers it in the Greek *meta*, which means not so much "with" as, first of all, "in the middle", "between" (some scholars derive the German *mit* from *meta*: indeed, *mit* and *Mitte* possess the same root), or in the Greek *koinos*, which means "common" but also seems to derive from *keiôn*, "to split into two". In all these etymologies we find conjunction and disjunction, dis-conjunction, reunion and separation, close and far, *concordia discors*.

IV. *Cum* and the World

In conclusion, if one must define the in-common and its structure of the interval, it should be a contra-essential definition: one would have to say that it is constituted by a task, a charge.⁹ Ultimately, it is in charge of nothing but the *cum* itself. We are in charge of our *avec* – *with/without* –, that is to say, of our *us*. This does not mean that one must hasten to proclaim some "responsibility for the community" (or the "state", the "people", "society"). Rather, this means we are in charge of the *avec* or the *inter* in,

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for and by which we *exist* in a strict, literal and radical sense: that is, to which we are *exposed*.

Cum is an exposure as well as, quite actively, an exposer: it brings and leaves us face to face with one another, it risks us, each against each other, and in the end it exposes us to nothing but the *experience* of being – “being” being nothing but being-exposed. So, what *cum* exposes is exactly the exposition of *cum*: a circular structure that simply means that *cum* has no end outside itself – no purpose, truth, law, ground or being than itself. It is its own end.¹⁰ But strangely enough, this “itself” is endless and without identity: only in this way can one maintain and take seriously its circularity. *Cum* is what “we” are: nothing but the way this singular-plural “subject” – we – expresses the co-existence of beings in the world. For *cum* opens “us” up to the world by showing us how “we” are this world. Thinking intermediality, then, may well lead to new philosophies of the community, of communication and of media and mediality, all of which gradually come to accept that the old distinction between our “we” and the world is no longer tenable.

V. Reserve

Still one must distrust here all pious resonances of “openness”, as well as of the “community”. Being open such as analyzed above has little to do with generosity, whether ascribed to some individual ethical attitude or to life as a whole. Being open is only the condition for the coexistence of finite singularities; *between* them – on their limit, between “outside” and “inside” – circulates the possibility of sense.

Likewise, devout resonances of “the Other” or “otherness” should be treated critically. *Cum* is not some alterity lying beyond the horizon of Western thought, presumed to have been neglected and forgotten; *cum* is not some Good, let alone a “good life” such as the ethics of “life style” and “art of living” recently try to promote. *Cum* interrupts our being from a margin we do not control: from the liminal and critical topos of the *inter*. It interrupts us whether we like it or not. It is this infinite interruption by something which is always already there – a “groundless ground” – that guards the singularity of voices speaking, hands writing, human beings acting, all of them not really knowing what they are doing.

Cum is utterly strange, yet so familiar. In the interval between these two extremes our singularity as well as our plurality must be played out, thought over and hoped for.

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Notes

- 1 The "groundwork" for this text is J.-L. Nancy's "Cum," in *La pensée dérobée* (Paris: Galilée, 2001), pp. 115-121 (This text first appeared as a preface to Roberto Esposito, *Communitas*; see below, note 10). It has been very freely rewritten by the two of us, leaving out and adding paragraphs in view of the theme of this volume.
- 2 Behind us lies an entire century of thinkers who have exactly problematized or still problematize this glorification and moralization of the community, however diverse their trajectories are: Bataille, Blanchot, Derrida, Badiou, Rancière, Balibar, Bailly, Esposito, Ferrari, and many others.
- 3 This release from religion and from the politico-religious system of the Middle Ages does not, by the way, immediately and simply imply a release from Christianity. It might well be that Christianity was not just a part of this system, but just as well, and from its very beginning, a long historical preparation to this release *from* religion. This would mean that the modern groundless ground of the community should be analyzed and deconstructed as a Christian heritage as well. As a consequence, the community's double logic of autodestruction and autoproduction should be pursued in an analysis of the auto-deconstruction of Christianity. Our present research is especially focused on this problematic: see Jean-Luc Nancy, *La décloison. Déconstruction du christianisme I*, Paris: Galilée, 2005 (English translation *Dis-Enclosure: Deconstruction of Christianity*, New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming), Alena Alexandrova, Ignaas Devisch, Laurens ten Kate, Aukje van Rooden (eds), *Retreating Religion: Deconstructing Christianity with Jean-Luc Nancy* (forthcoming), and Laurens ten Kate, *Barth, Derrida and the Possibilities of a Theology of Différance* (forthcoming).
- 4 See also Ignaas Devisch, *We: Jean-Luc Nancy and the Question of the Community in Contemporary Philosophy* (forthcoming).
- 5 This tertium should not be understood in the classic dialectical way. It does not reconcile subject and object, the "I" and its "other," but simply leaves itself open as a topos, as the abyss of the *inter*. See also William Desmond *Perplexity and Ultimacy: Metaphysical Thoughts from the Middle* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), on the important question whether such an idea of a non-dialectical *inter* should also – or even particularly – be sought in Hegel's work. See also Wouter Klouwen, *Die Wirklichkeit der Geschichte: Ein Vergleich zwischen K. Barth und G.W.F. Hegel* (Zoetermeer, NL: Boekencentrum, 1998), on the concept of "das Dritte" in Hegel's *Logik*. An important, but mostly forgot-

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ten study on the non-dialectical middle in Hegel is: Jan van der Meulen, *Hegel. Die gebrochene Mitte*, Hamburg: Meiner, 1958.

- 6 In this sense, the philosophical structure of the in-common may well be similar to e.g. that of Blanchot's *neuter* or Derrida's *différance*. Exploring these similarities should, in our view, be one of the perspectives of the research in the interdisciplinary field of 'intermedialities'.
- 7 Pursuing this argument, one should state that the concept of *Mitdasein* is a pleonasm, something Heidegger would probably be reluctant to admit. There is no *Dasein* without *Mitsein*, but in *Being and Time* the concept of *Mitsein* is still presented marginally as just one of the *Existentialen des Daseins*. In a parallel way, one may observe that the concept of 'intermediality' is a pleonasm, the topos of the *inter – da* – being nothing else than the event of medial exposure – *mit*. There is no mediality without or outside the structure of the *inter*.
- 8 Here we can only agree with Heidegger: this 'in the open' and this 'always elsewhere' are the key elements of the way *Dasein* "opens itself to the *Sein*." *Dasein* is nothing else than a relation: "opening oneself to being," which implies that in the end the concept of being itself (*Sein*) should be thought in its relationality, that is, existentially.
- 9 *Avec* originates from the Latin *apud hoc*, "close to this or that."
- 10 In *Communitas* (Paris: PUF, 2000), Roberto Esposito demonstrates that the *cum* of the community lets us share a task, a charge, and not a substance or identity. The Latin *communis* ('joint') originates from *co-munus*, *munus* meaning "task," "burden."
- 11 It is its own end in the way Bataille formulated his concept of *experience* and a bit later that of *sovereignty*, which, in his work, always precisely designate the experience of 'communication', of the in-common. This experience is "its own authority and value," and its sovereignty, beyond any scheme of subject-object, that is, of power, is "nothing" ("rien"). See *Inner Experience*, trans. L. A. Boldt, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1943/1988), pp. 6-7.