



## Introduction: Nothing in Common

Nothing seems more appropriate today than thinking community, nothing more necessary, demanded, and heralded by a situation that joins in a unique epochal knot the failure of all communisms with the misery of new individualisms.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, nothing is further from view; nothing so remote, repressed, and put off until later, to a distant and indecipherable horizon. It isn't that the philosophies expressly addressed to thinking community were or are lacking. On the contrary, they tend to constitute one of the most dominant themes debated internationally.<sup>2</sup> Yet not only do they remain well within this unthinkability of community but they constitute its most symptomatic expression. There is something else as well that goes beyond the specific modalities in question (communal, communitarian, communicative) that contemporary political philosophy adopts now and again and that concerns instead community's very form: the community isn't translatable into a political-philosophical lexicon except by completely distorting (or indeed perverting) it, as we saw occur so tragically in the last century. This appears to contradict the tendency of a certain kind of political philosophy to see in the question of community its very same object. It is this reduction to "object" of a political-philosophical discourse that forces community into a conceptual language that radically alters it, while at the same time attempts to name it: that of the individual *and* totality; of identity *and* the particular; of the origin *and* the end; or more simply of the *subject* with its most unassailable metaphysical connotations of unity, absoluteness, and interiority.<sup>3</sup> It isn't by chance that

beginning from similar assumptions, political philosophy tends to think community as a “wider subjectivity”; as, and this in spite of the presupposed opposition to the individualist paradigm, such a large part of neo-communitarian philosophy ends up doing, when it swells the self in the hypertrophic figure of “the unity of unities.”<sup>4</sup> This also occurs in those cultures of intersubjectivity always intent on finding otherness in an alter ego similar in everything to the *ipse* that they would like to challenge and that instead they reproduce.

The truth is that these conceptions are united by the ignored assumption that community is a “property” belonging to subjects that join them together [*accomuna*]: an attribute, a definition, a predicate that qualifies them as belonging to the same totality [*insieme*], or as a “substance” that is produced by their union. In each case community is conceived of as a quality that is added to their nature as subjects, making them *also* subjects of community. *More* subjects, subjects of a larger entity, one that is senior or even better than simple individual identity, but from which it originates and in the end reflects. Despite the obvious historical, conceptual, and lexical differences, from this perspective the organicistic sociology of *Gemeinschaft*, American neo-communitarianism, and the various ethics of communication (and the communist tradition as well, despite quite a different categorical profile) lie beyond the same line that keeps them within the unthinkable of community. For all these philosophies, in fact, it is a “fullness” or a “whole” (the originary meaning of the lemma *teuta* is fitting then, which in different Indo-European dialects means “swollen,” “potent,” and therefore the “fullness” of the social body insofar as it is *ethnos*, *Volk*, people).<sup>5</sup> It is also, using a seemingly different terminology, a good, a value, an essence, which depending on the case in question, can be lost and then refound as something that once belonged to us and that therefore can once again belong to us; an origin to be mourned or a destiny foreshadowed based on the perfect symmetry that links *arche* and *telos*. In each case, community is what is most properly our “own” [*il nostro più proprio*]. Whether it needs to appropriate what is common to us (for communisms and communitarianisms) or to communicate what is most properly our own (for the ethics of communication), what is produced doesn’t change. The community remains doubly tied to the semantics of *proprium*. On this score, it isn’t necessary to touch on the post-Romantic mannerism of

Ferdinand Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft*, which differs from *Gesellschaft* on the basis of the originary appropriation of its own proper essence. It's enough to recall in this regard Max Weber's most secularized community in order to find highlighted, albeit in a denaturalized form, the very same figure of belonging: "The *communalization* of social relationships occurs if and insofar as the orientation of social behavior—whether in the individual case, on the average or in the idea type—is based on a sense of solidarity: the result of emotional or traditional attachments of participants."<sup>6</sup> That this possession might refer above all to territory doesn't change things at all,<sup>7</sup> since territory is defined by the category of "appropriation," as the originary matrix of every other property that follows.<sup>8</sup> If we linger a little and reflect on community without invoking contemporary models, the most paradoxical aspect of the question is that the "common" is defined exactly through its most obvious antonym: what is common is that which unites the ethnic, territorial, and spiritual property of every one of its members. They have in common what is most properly their own; they are the owners of what is common to them all.

My first intention in this work lies in distancing myself from this dialectic. Yet if, as we say, this dialectic constitutively inheres in the conceptual language of modern political philosophy, the only way to escape from it resides in locating a point of departure, a hermeneutic support, that is both outside and autonomous with respect to such a dialectic. I've searched for this point, in a manner of speaking, within the origin of the very thing itself under investigation, in the etymology of the Latin term *communitas*. In order to do so, I had to proceed along a path that was anything but easy, one that moves across lexical traps and difficulties in interpretation, but that can lead to a notion of community that is radically different from those that have been dealt with up to now.

Indeed, as dictionaries show, the first meaning of the noun *communitas* and of its corresponding adjective, *communis*, is what becomes meaningful from the opposition to what is proper. In all neo-Latin languages (though not only), "common" (*commun*, *comun*, *kommun*) is what is *not* proper [*proprio*], that begins where what is proper ends: *Quod commune cum alio est desinit esse proprium*.<sup>9</sup> It is what belongs to more than one, to many or to everyone, and therefore is that which is "public" in opposition to "private" or "general" (though also "collective") in contrast to "individual"

[*particolare*]. In addition to this first canonical meaning, which is already traceable to the Greek *koinos* (and also translated in the Gothic *gemein* and its derivatives *Gemeinde*, *Gemeinschaft*, *Vergemeinschaftung*), there is still another meaning to be added, one, however, less obvious because it transfers properly within itself the larger semantic complexity of the term from which it originates: *munus* (its archaic form is *moinus*, *moenus*), which is composed of the root *mei-* and the suffix *-nes*, both of which have a social connotation.<sup>10</sup> This term, in fact, oscillates in turn among three meanings that aren't at all the same and that seem to make it miss its mark, or at least to limit the emphasis, the initial juxtaposition of "public/private"—*munus dicitur tum de privatis, tum de publicis*—in favor of another conceptual area that is completely traceable to the idea of "obligation" [*dovere*].<sup>11</sup> These are *onus*, *officium*, and *donum*.<sup>12</sup> In truth, for the first two the meaning of duty [*dovere*] is immediately clear: obligation, office, official, position [*impiego*], and post. The third appears, however, to be more problematic. In what sense would a gift [*dono*] be a duty? Doesn't there appear, on the contrary, something spontaneous and therefore eminently voluntary in the notion of gift?

Yet the specificity of the gift expressed in the word *munus* with respect to the more general use of *donum* has the effect of reducing the initial distance and of realigning this meaning with the semantics of duty. The *munus* in fact is to *donum* as "species is to genus,"<sup>13</sup> because, yes, it means "gift," but a particular gift, "distinguished by its obligatory character, implied by its root *mei-*, which denotes exchange."<sup>14</sup> With respect to the circular relation between gift and exchange, one can't help referring to Emile Benveniste's well-known studies and, even earlier, to Marcel Mauss's famous essay on the relationship.<sup>15</sup> But let's stay for a moment longer with the element of being obliged [*doverosità*]: once someone has accepted the *munus*, an obligation (*onus*) has been created to exchange it either in terms of goods or service [*servizio*]. Once again the superimposition between "gift" and "office" comes into view, which in addition are distinctly joined in the expression *munere fungi*.<sup>16</sup> It's true that Benveniste, following Mauss's lead, traces the necessity of the exchange, of the "counter-gift," even before in the root *do-* and therefore in the derivatives *doron*, *dorea*, and *dosis*; from there we find the doubly crossed direction of "give" [*dare*] and "take" [*prendere*], "to take (to give) to" [in English.—Trans.],

which are transposed in *donum* [gift], and situates in Benveniste's view the specificity of the latter in a present [*regalo*] that is potentially unilateral. By this I mean that it does not require an equal return or remuneration, as is shown in the late Thomistic expression *donum proprie est "datio irredibilis," id est quod non datur intentione retributionis*.<sup>17</sup> Yet it is in this withdrawal from being forced into an obligation that lies the lesser intensity of the *donum* with respect to the unrelenting compulsion [*cogenza*] of the *munus*. In short, this is the gift that one gives because one *must* give and because one *cannot not* give. It has a tone so clearly of being obliged [*doverosità*] as to modify or even to interrupt the one-to-one correspondence of the relation between the gift giver [*donatore*] and the recipient [*donatario*]. Although produced by a benefit that was previously received, the *munus* indicates only the gift that one gives, not what one receives.<sup>18</sup> All of the *munus* is projected onto the transitive act of giving. It doesn't by any means imply the stability of a possession and even less the acquisitive dynamic of something earned, but loss, subtraction, transfer. It is a "pledge" or a "tribute" that one pays in an obligatory form. The *munus* is the obligation that is contracted with respect to the other and that invites a suitable release from the obligation. The gratitude that *demand*s new donations. *Munus*, in this sense, and even more *munificus*, is he who shows the proper "grace," according to the equation of Plautus's *gratus-munus*.<sup>19</sup> giving something that one can *not* keep for oneself and over which, therefore, one is not completely master. I realize that I am forcing slightly the concept of "gratefulness," which is more literally expressive of the *munus*. Yet what else does the "one obliged" [*il riconoscente*] accede to if not that he unequivocally "owes" something of which he was the beneficiary and that he is called to acknowledge in a form that places him "at the disposition of" or more drastically "at the mercy of" someone else? What predominates in the *munus* is, in other words, reciprocity or "mutuality" (*munus-mutuus*) of giving that assigns the one to the other in an obligation [*impegno*]. But let's also add in a common oath: *iurare communiam* or *communione* in the sacred bond of the *coniuratio*.

If we relate this final meaning of *munus* to the collective *communitas*, we can draw forth a new force with respect to the classic duality "public/private," one that calls into question (or at least problematizes) the widespread but rather dubious homology between *communitas* and *res publica*,

which in turn produces the equally problematic synonym *koinonia-polis* (originally authorized by the Aristotelian *koinonia politike*, which is translated most frequently in Latin as *communitas* and not as *societas*).<sup>20</sup> The semantic disparity registered in this making homologous of *res publica* and *communitas* concerns, on the one hand, the excessive vagueness of the attribute *publica*, but especially, on the other hand, the “quality” of the *res*. What is the “thing” that the members of the community have in common, and is it really “something” positive? Is it a good; is it wealth? Interest perhaps? Dictionaries provide us with a clear answer. Despite their warning that we aren’t dealing with a certified meaning, they do tell us that the ancient and presumably originary meaning of *communis* had to be “he who shares an office [*carica*], a burden [*carico*], a task [*incarico*].” From here it emerges that *communitas* is the totality of persons united not by a “property” but precisely by an obligation or a debt; not by an “addition” [*più*] but by a “subtraction” [*meno*]: by a lack, a limit that is configured as an onus, or even as a defective modality for him who is “affected,” unlike for him who is instead “exempt” [*esente*] or “exempted.” Here we find the final and most characteristic of the oppositions associated with (or that dominate) the alternative between public and private, those in other words that contrast *communitas* to *immunitas*. If *communis* is he who is required to carry out the functions of an office—or to the donation [*elargizione*] of a grace—on the contrary, he is called immune who has to perform no office [*immunis dicitur qui nullo fungitur officio*], and for that reason he remains ungrateful [*ingratus*].<sup>21</sup> He can completely preserve his own position [*sostanza*] through a *vacatio muneris*. Whereas the *communitas* is bound by the sacrifice of the *compensatio*, the *immunitas* implies the beneficiary of the *dispensatio*.

The contentious result of this etymological journey with respect to the various philosophies of community cannot be ignored. As the complex though equally unambiguous etymology that we have till now undertaken demonstrates, the *munus* that the *communitas* shares isn’t a property or a possession [*appartenenza*].<sup>22</sup> It isn’t having, but on the contrary, is a debt, a pledge, a gift that is to be given, and that therefore will establish a lack. The subjects of community are united by an “obligation,” in the sense that we say “I owe *you* something,” but not “you owe *me* something.” This is what makes them not less than the masters of themselves, and that more

precisely expropriates them of their initial property (in part or completely), of the most proper property, namely, their very subjectivity. We thus come 180 degrees back to the synonymy of “common-proper,” which the philosophies of community unconsciously presuppose, and to the restoration of the fundamental opposition: the common is not characterized by what is proper but by what is improper, or even more drastically, by the other; by a voiding [*svuotamento*], be it partial or whole, of property into its negative; by removing what is properly one’s own [*depropriazione*] that invests and decenters the proprietary subject, forcing him to take leave [*uscire*] of himself, to alter himself. In the community, subjects do not find a principle of identification nor an aseptic enclosure within which they can establish transparent communication or even a content to be communicated. They don’t find anything else except that void, that distance, that extraneousness that constitutes them as being missing from themselves; “givers to” inasmuch as they themselves are “given by” [*donati da*] a circuit of mutual gift giving that finds its own specificity in its indirectness with respect to the frontal nature of the subject-object relation or to the ontological fullness of the person (if not in the daunting semantic duplicity of the French *personne*, which can mean both “person” and “no one”).<sup>23</sup>

*Not* subjects. Or subjects of their own proper lack, of the lack of the proper. Subjects of a radical impropriety that coincides with an absolute contingency or just simply “coincides,” that falls together. Finite subjects, cut by a limit that cannot be interiorized because it constitutes precisely their “outside”; the exteriority that they overlook and that enters into them in their common non-belonging. Therefore the community cannot be thought of as a body, as a corporation [*corporazione*] in which individuals are founded in a larger individual. Neither is community to be interpreted as a mutual, intersubjective “recognition” in which individuals are reflected in each other so as to confirm their initial identity; as a collective bond that comes at a certain point to connect individuals that before were separate. The community isn’t a mode of being, much less a “making” of the individual subject. It isn’t the subject’s expansion or multiplication but its exposure to what interrupts the closing and turns it inside out: a dizziness, a syncope, a spasm in the continuity of the subject. The common “rose” of its being “no subject.” No one’s rose [*Niemandrose*], or even better, “no person’s rose” [*rose de personne*], as the greatest poet of the

twentieth century would have said about community, abandoning himself [*deponendosi*] to the ultimate *munus*.<sup>24</sup>

Naturally, the subject who experiences this exposure (or devotion, the *munus* of self) doesn't perceive it as painless. Exposure, which pushes him into contact with what he is not, with his "nothing," is the most extreme of its possibilities but also the riskiest of threats, as was largely implicit in the always risky (when not conflict-producing) semantics of the *donum-damnum*, expressed with extraordinary clarity in the Virgilian *timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*, that is, not in spite of the fact that they bring gifts but *because* they do.<sup>25</sup> That which everyone fears in the *munus*, which is both "hospitable" and "hostile," according to the troubling lexical proximity of *hospes-hostis*, is the violent loss of borders, which awarding identity to him, ensures his subsistence.<sup>26</sup> We always need to keep these two faces of *communitas* uppermost in mind: *communitas* is simultaneously both the most suitable, indeed the sole, dimension of the animal "man," but *communitas* is also its most potentially disintegrating impetus for a drift in meaning of that dimension of the animal "man." Seen from this point of view, therefore, the community isn't only to be identified with the *res publica*, with the common "thing," but rather is the hole into which the common thing continually risks falling, a sort of landslide produced laterally and within. This fault line that surrounds and penetrates the "social" is always perceived as the constitutive danger of our co-living, more than in it. We need to watch out for this without ever forgetting that it is *communitas* itself that causes the landslide; the threshold that we can't leave behind because it always outruns us as our very same (in)originary origin; as the unreachable Object into which our subjectivity risks falling and being lost. Here then is the blinding truth that is kept within the etymological folds of *communitas*; the public thing [*res publica*] is inseparable from no-thing [*niente*]. It is precisely the no-thing of the thing that is our common ground [*fondo*]. All of the stories that tell of the founding crime, the collective crime, the ritual assassination, the sacrificial victim featured in the history of civilization don't do anything else except evoke metaphorically the *delinquere* that keeps us together, in the technical sense of "to lack" and "to be wanting";<sup>27</sup> the breach, the trauma, the lacuna out of which we originate. Not the Origin but its absence, its withdrawal. It is the originary *munus* that constitutes us and makes us destitute in our mortal finiteness.



The grand philosophical tradition has always intuited that the question of community borders on death to such a degree that one could read Plato and Machiavelli, as different as they are, precisely by the optic that such an equation between death and community creates. Yet it's only in the modern period, let's say at the end of the *res publica christiana*, that this fact begins to appear as a problem, indeed as *the* fundamental problem that political philosophy is obliged to interpret and resolve. Before seeing how it does so, we need to turn for a moment to the Christian conception of community if we are to complete the categorical and semantic frame that functions as the presupposition for the communitarian genealogy under examination here. Things are made more difficult by the double move—historical-institutional and theological-philosophical—the term *communitas* undergoes when it is interwoven with that of *koinonia*, especially in the New Testament.<sup>28</sup> The first vector would seem to follow an itinerary of the increasing erasure of the originary ancipital character of the *munus* in the direction of that “appropriating” drift in meaning to which the *lectio difficilior* of *communitas* is still sacrificed. In all of the medieval lexicons, in fact, the lemma *communitas* is associated with the concept of “belonging,” in its contemporary subjective and objective meaning: the community is that which belongs to a collective *and* is that to which it belongs as its own properly essential type [*genere*]: *communitas entis*. Over time, however, the particular [*localisitico*] character of this totality always takes on the shape of a fixed territory, as emerges in the nearness of usage between the concept of *communitas* and those of *civitas* and *castrum*, the latter having an obvious military inflection, signifying the defense of proper borders. It's true that this meaning initially takes on a noninstitutional force, unlike the parallel expression *universitas*.<sup>29</sup> Yet slowly, and above all in France and Italy, those *communia* that before signified a simple rural or urban collection now begin to acquire the increasingly formal traits of a true juridical-political institution, until *communia* designates, from the twelfth century on, the features that autonomous cities possess both factually and legally, which is to say, they are the proprietors of themselves.

Nonetheless, this drastic simplification that *communitas* undergoes juridically, especially in the early centuries, is accompanied (and subtly contradicted) by the semantic complexity that concerns the theological term *koinonia*. In reality it isn't completely equivalent to *communitas* nor

to *communio*, to which it's often joined in the translations. Nor does it coincide with *ekklesia*, to which it's just as often confused. Indeed, one could argue that it is the arduous relation that the *koinonia* has with the originary form of *munus* that distances it from its strictly ecclesiastical inflection. How so? We know that at least from Acts of the Apostles (2: 42), but especially from Paul's entire letter to the Corinthians (and then following along the entire course of Patristic literature), the "common place" [*luogo comune*] of the *koinonia* is constituted by the Eucharistic participation in the *Corpus Christi* that the Church represents. Yet the problem posed lies in these two joined (though nevertheless distinct) figures of "representation" and "participation." The most perceptive commentators have always underscored that what is not to be lost in the latter notion is the vertical dimension that unites man and God, but also separates them due to the infinite heterogeneity of substance.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, it is God and man since only God is entitled to subjectivity, to being the initiative of the relation, to which man can't be anything but receptive. Man receives the gift (here surfaces once again the *munus*) that God, through the sacrifice of Christ, makes to him, a gift that is both free and overabundant.<sup>31</sup> Against a purely anthropological reading, one that is completely horizontal, one needs to respond firmly that it is only this first *munus* from on high that puts men in the position of having something in common with each other. And it is precisely this "given"—what is given to us, we ourselves as "given," "donated," born from a gift—that stands in the way of any hasty translation of *koinonia* into a simple *philia*—"friendship," "fellowship" [in English.—Trans.], "camaraderie," or "*Freundschaft*." Yes we are brothers, *koinonoi*, but brothers *in Christ*, in an otherness that withdraws us from our subjectivity, our own subjective property, so as to pin it, subjectivity, to a point that is "void of subject" from which we come and toward which we are called, just as long as we remain "grateful" so as to respond to that first *munus* with a corresponding gift. This, nevertheless, doesn't alter the fact that our giving is inevitably inadequate, wanting, purely reactive with respect to the only gift that is truly such, because it is unconditional, which has already come to us from the Creator (1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Cor. 9:15). From this, however, we can deduce that what we offer isn't a true gift or that the gift is not completely ours (1 Cor. 4:7). We can deduce that the possibility of the gift is withdrawn from us in the precise moment when it

is given to us; or that it is given to us in the form of its withdrawal. This gift-giving [*donativo*] inflection of “participation” restores to the Christian *koinonia* all of the expropriating drama of the ancient *munus*, what one participates in isn’t the glory of the Resurrection but the suffering and the blood of the Cross (1 Cor. 10:16; Phil. 3:10). Any possibility of appropriation is diminished; “taking part in” means everything except “to take”; on the contrary, it means losing something, to be weakened, to share the fate of the servant, not of the master (Phil. 3:10–11). His death. The gift of life, offered in the communitarian archetype of the Last Supper.

One will want to say that Augustine “inflects” Paul’s message in a direction that is even more contradictory. Also, the *dilectio proximi* is thought from the essence of a created being, as finished, as heteronymous, and nonsubjective. What joins us in the same “community of destiny,” in a communal future, is our being *morituri*;<sup>32</sup> therefore the *communis fides* that we share with those like us can be experienced only in the bitter solitude of the singular relation with God.<sup>33</sup> That, however, isn’t anything other than the consequence of an earlier *communitas* that Augustine doesn’t hesitate in describing as “the community of guilt” since “Totus ergo mundus ex Adam reus.”<sup>34</sup> The community coincides with the complicity established initially by Adam and fixed by Cain even *before* the moment when Abel constituted the city of God: “Natus est igitur prior Cain posterior Abel.”<sup>35</sup> On this point Augustine is terribly explicit—it is the sedentary Cain and not the pilgrim Abel who founds the human community.<sup>36</sup> And that first fratricidal violence inevitably refers to every future founding of community, as that of Romulus confirms with a sort of tragic punctuality.<sup>37</sup> What this means is that the human community is in close contact with death, “a society from and with the dead.”<sup>38</sup> This second origin (an origin through birth) remains stuck like a kind of thorn or poisoned gift in the first origin (*the Creation*); as testimony to a “doubleness,” to the duplicity of the origin, from which it will no longer be possible to free oneself, not even when men will be called to the *sanctorum communio*. The reason is that the past, *that* past, cannot be erased by a *caritas* [love] from which it logically descends.<sup>39</sup>

Yet Augustine says something else that introduces us into the modern, Hobbesian, perception of community: the love for one’s neighbor is directly proportional to the memory of common danger (*communis*

*periculi*) that we share.<sup>40</sup> If the community of sin from which we originate is marked by fear, no one can be secure in this life, which is literally besieged by death; but also the *communitas fidei*, which, structured so as to be the salvific compensation of the first, inevitably remains prey to the fear [*timore*] no less acute of another, and even more definitive, death. Caught in the grip of this double danger, the *communitas* (on the Christian side as well, we should note) acknowledges its constitutive alliance with nothing. “Eating up time [*devorans tempora*] as I was myself eaten by it [*devorata temporibus*]:”<sup>41</sup> *communitas* seems to defer the gift of life at the unbearable abduction of the fear of death.

Modern political philosophy attempts to respond to this unacceptable *munus*. How? Here reappears that category of “immunization” that we saw as constituting the most incisive semantic counterpoint of *communitas*.<sup>42</sup> The thesis I would like to advance in this regard is that the category of immunization is so important that it can be taken as the explicative key of the entire modern paradigm, not only in conjunction with but even more than other hermeneutic models, such as those we find in “secularization,” “legitimation,” and “rationalization,” terms that hide or diminish the lexical significance of modernity. The reason is that, yes, there are echoes in these models, distant with respect to the premodern past, but not of the prospective inversion and the negative power [*potenza*] of the negative that juxtaposes directly *immunitas* and *communitas*. The “immune” is not simply different from the “common” but is its opposite, what empties it out until it has been completely left bare, not only of its effects but also of its own presupposition; just as the “immunitarian” project of modernity isn’t directed only against the specific *munera* (class obligations, ecclesial bonds, free services that weigh on men in the earlier phase) but against the very same law of their associated coexistence [*convivenza*]. The modern individual, who assigns to every service its specific price, can no longer bear the gratitude that the gift demands.<sup>43</sup> The term “absolutism” also carries within it this meaning of “decision,” which means violent breaking of his roots. There is no need to hypothesize any sort of former idyllic community, no primitive “organic society” that exists only in the Romantic *imagerie* of the nineteenth century, to see how modernity is affirmed in its violent separation from an order in which the benefits no longer balance the risks that these same benefits require as

the two inseparable faces joined in the combined concept of *munus*—gift and obligation, benefit and service rendered, joining and threat. Modern individuals truly become that, the perfectly individual, the “absolute” individual,<sup>44</sup> bordered in such a way that they are isolated and protected, but only if they are freed in advance from the “debt” that binds them one to the other; if they are released from, exonerated, or relieved of that contact, which threatens their identity, exposing them to possible conflict with their neighbor, exposing them to the contagion of the relation with others.<sup>45</sup>

As will emerge in the following pages, the philosopher who first and more radically than anyone else followed this logic to its extreme theoretical consequences was Thomas Hobbes. His extraordinary hermeneutic force lies in having extended the semantic complexity of the common *delinquere* to its bare literalness of collective “crime”—to the society of Cain, which Hobbes in theological terms unconsciously incorporates into his own lexicon at the same time that he attempts to free the lexicon precisely from the theological. What men have in common, what makes them more like each other than anything else, is their generalized capacity to be killed: the fact that anyone can be killed by anyone else. This is what Hobbes sees in the dark depths of the community, this is how he interprets community’s indecipherable law: the *communitas* carries within it a gift of death. From it inevitably arises the following: if community is so threatening to the individual integrity of the subjects that it puts into relation, nothing else remains for us except to “immunize us” beforehand and, in so doing, to negate the very same foundations of community. The keenness of Hobbes’s observation is matched by the drastic nature of the solution. Since the common origin threatens to drag down with it into the vortex all those that it attracts, the only way to save oneself is by breaking cleanly from it; by limiting it in a “before” that cannot be joined to what comes “after”; to institute between before and after a border that cannot be crossed without catastrophically falling back again into the condition from which one had wanted to escape. What is to be loosened is the link with the originary dimension of common living (Hobbes will say “natural” living) via the institution of another artificial origin that coincides with the juridically “privatistic” and logically “privative” figure of the contract. Hobbes perfectly registers its immunizing power with regard to the

previous situation when he defines the statute through the juxtaposition with that of the gift: above all, the contract is that which is *not* a gift; it is the absence of *munus*, the neutralization of its poisonous fruits.

Naturally, the immunity, and more generally, the modern option in Hobbes has a price, indeed a terribly high price. What is cut and expelled in the sovereign decision is the very same content of the new form, which in any case is inevitable given the homeopathic nature of the remedy: occupy the void of the *munus*, the originary fault line, with an even more radical void [*vuoto*]; eliminate [*svuotare*] the danger of the *cum* by utterly eradicating it.<sup>46</sup> In fact, the Leviathan-State coincides with the breaking of every communitarian bond, with the squelching of every social relation that is foreign to the vertical exchange of protection-obedience. It is the bare [*nudo*] relation of no relation.<sup>47</sup> If the community entails crime, the only way an individual can survive lies in the crime of the community. Here is sketched for the first time in its most theoretically accomplished form that “pyramid of sacrifice,” which in a certain sense constitutes the predominant feature of modern history.<sup>48</sup> What is sacrificed is nothing other than the *cum*, the relation among men, and for that reason as well, in some way men themselves are sacrificed. They are paradoxically sacrificed to their own survival. They live *in* and *of* their refusal to live together [*convivere*]. It’s impossible not to recognize here a remnant of irrationality that is subtly introduced into the folds of the most rational of systems: life is preserved through the presupposition of its sacrifice, the sum of refusals out of which sovereign authorization is made. Life is sacrificed to the preservation of life. In this convergence of the preservation of life and its capacity to be sacrificed, modern immunization reaches the height of its own destructive power [*potenza*].

Nevertheless, modernity doesn’t entirely coincide with the sacrificial mechanism to which it also gives rise. It’s true that modernity is self-legitimizing, cutting itself off from every social bond, from every natural link, from every common law. Yet there also emerges from within modernity itself the tragic knowledge of the nihilistic character of this decision. The Hobbesian uprooting [*taglio delle radici*] is lived therefore with a sense of “guilt” with respect to a community, both whose absence and necessity one recognizes. It is this vector of self-problematization, running like a subterranean river through modern philosophy that is the object of the

pages that follow. What I have tried to reconstruct is that line of thought, which from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Georges Bataille, moving through Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger, reintroduces the question of community that modernity seemed to have completely closed off, but also the radical transformation that community experiences in this transition from Rousseau's semantics of "guilt" [*colpa*] to that Kantian one of "law," until we arrive at the "ecstatic" opening of Heidegger and the "sovereign" experience of Bataille. It needs to be said straightaway that we're dealing with an extremely subtle kind of thought—a "broken path," a space that is always on the point of being closed off, not only because it is objectively restricted by the "immunizing" vocation of the most substantial part of the modern project but expressly because this kind of thought is completely jeopardized by a mythic drift that accompanies it like an originary risk or a slippery slope across the entire arc of its development.

This myth is generated when the constitutively concave character of *communitas* is displaced by its affirmative entification. All of the figures of identity, fusion, and endogamy that the representation of community will assume in modern political philosophy are nothing other than the unavoidable result of this first conceptual short-circuit. If the *communitas* is the escape or release from the individual subject, its myth is the interiorization of this exteriority, the representative doubling of its presence and the essentialization of its existence.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, there's no need to look at this excessive superimposition only as a subjective "error" on the part of the interpreter. It does nothing other than express the objectively inherent interval of difference with regard to the semantic double bottom of the concept of *munus*, to the structural ambiguity of its constitutively equivocal figure. The mythological inclination that all philosophies of community experience as the irresolvable blind spot of their own perspective consists in the difficulty of taking on and supporting the void of the *munus* as the object of philosophical reflection. How are we to think the *pure relation* without supplying it with subjective substance? How do we fix our gaze on it, without lowering it from the nothing that surrounds and traverses the common *res*? Notwithstanding all the theoretical precautions intent on guaranteeing the void of pure relation, that void tends to present itself in almost irresistible fashion as fullness; it tends to reduce the generality of "in common" in the specificity of *a* common subject.

Once identified, be it with a people, a territory, or an essence, the community is walled in within itself and thus separated from the outside. This is how the mythical reversal takes place. The Western tradition is literally hammered by this *koine*-centric conversion, almost like a recurring countertendency, more than a simple residue, a tradition on which is imprinted its growing immunitarian impulse. Yesterday as well as today (indeed more so today than yesterday), community appears to be marked, indeed saturated with communitarianism, patriotism, and local and factional interest that with regard to *communitas* constitute not only something different but the clearest kind of negation; both the paroxysm and parody that are produced every now and then in the “impropriety” of the common, when the reference to the “proper,” or the voice of the “authentic,” or the assumption of being pure, reappears. It’s useful here to consider that *communis* (always referring to its earliest meaning) meant in addition to “vulgar” and “of the people,” also “impure”: “dirty services” [*sordida munera*]. We could say that this mixed or hybrid element, together not only with common sense but also political-philosophical discourse, is unable to endure when the search for its own proper and essential foundation is taken up again. Then what is simply exposed, namely, the *cum*, takes on the characteristic of a presupposition that is destined to be actualized. It is the dialectic of lost and found, of alienation and reappropriation, of flight and return that joins all *philosophies* of community in a mythology of origin. If the community belongs to us as our deepest and most proper root, we can, in fact we must, find it again or reproduce it, in line with its originary essence.

It’s not by accident that the grand thought of community coincides with the deconstruction of this dialectic. What Rousseau previously had refused is the idea of an origin fully reproducible as such through the course of history. He was the first to register the fracture of difference that cuts the beginning [*inizio*] through an irrecoverable difference into a logical commencing [*cominciamento*] and a historical genesis and therefore was the first to withdraw the concept of community from its affirmative entification. Community appears to be definable only on the basis of the lack that characterizes it. It is *nothing other* than what history has negated, the nonhistoric backdrop from which history originates in the form of a necessary betrayal. The fact that Rousseau’s discovery of the originary



fracture is always on the point of falling prey again to the myth of a naturally incorrupt dimension (with all the aporetic consequences that ensue) doesn't erase the critical potential with regard to modern immunization.

Kant, more than any other, appears to have understood both the importance and the limit of these discoveries when he shifts the definition of community from the anthropological level of will to that of the transcendental one of law. The result of this move is a further and more powerful destructuring of the philosophy of the origin. Caught between the antinomical conjunction of freedom with evil, the origin literally becomes impenetrable in the precise sense that it cannot be defined except by the otherness that separates it from itself. It is from this perspective that, together with the mythologeme of the state of nature, every recompen-satory dialectic between origin and later accomplishment fails. Kant criticizes it not only for the irremediably unsocial character of human nature but above all because the law of community isn't feasible as a matter of principle. That the categorical imperative doesn't dictate anything other than its own proper obligingness—it has no fixed content—means that its object is in and of itself unattainable or that our “thing” is inhabited by no-thing; that men are united by a “not” that joins them in a difference that cannot be lessened. Thus, Kant registers for the first time the antibiological character of *communitas*: its being a gift that does not belong to the subject, indeed that weakens [*reduce*] the subject and that hollows him out through a never-ending obligation, one that prescribes what is prohibited and prohibits what is prescribed.

In the case of Kant, nevertheless, the thought of community doesn't lack for contradictions and subtle wrinkles of meaning. The reason is not only that his transcendental perspective is shown to be open to a return of sorts to empirical anthropology, and therefore to a latent superimposition between the radical language of community and a more traditional intersubjective semantics, but also that the same reduction of community to its unattainable law discloses a residue of teleology. It is the underlying claim that Heidegger makes with respect to Kantian criticism, albeit in a reading that recovers and valorizes more than all of Kant's other interpreters his tense problematic with respect to subjectivity. Not even the law is to be made absolute as the very origin, because it is in turn preceded by an “out-law” [*fuorilegge*] even more originary that is precisely that *cum* to

which we always belong with respect to temporal existence: *coexistence*. This means that the community is unattainable because it is barred by a cruel *nomos* that blocks our access and because of the simple fact that it is already given, here and now, in its constitutive withdrawal. For this reason community is neither promised nor to be disclosed beforehand, neither presupposed nor predetermined. Community doesn't require a teleology nor an archaeology since the origin already lies in its after; the origin is already perfectly contemporaneous with what follows. It is the opening of being that is given by and in its withdrawal, and that draws back when it is offered, in the very trembling of our existence.

There's no need to recall that Heidegger's thinking of community is anything but sheltered from a return to myth, and indeed from one of the most terrible of all political myths. This was obvious when he was tempted to reinstate the *munus* within the horizon of the proper, and indeed of the property, of a single people—losing the *munus* together with the *cum* that constitutes it as our “we-others” [*noi-altri*]. This is exactly the knot that Bataille cuts in an extreme combat with that thought, thanks to the formulation of a “non-knowledge” that decidedly exceeds the sacrificial horizon of political philosophy. Yet even more of interest in the economy of our work is Bataille's positioning of this excess in such a way as to drive him to the final, or better, the first meaning of that *munus*, which was our starting point from the central void of community; to the gift of self to which the subject feels driven by an unavoidable obligation because it is one with the subject's own proper desire.<sup>50</sup> Here one finds the most explicit contradiction of that process of immunization that beginning with Hobbes is put forward as the prevalent vector of meaning in the modern paradigm. That which Bataille contrasts with the “restricted economy” of a *conservatio vitae*, which culminates in the compulsory sacrifice of all who emerge as nonfunctional to such a preservation of life, is a conception of negative energetic excess that pushes the individual beyond his own limits while risking his life. In a flash that relation between community and death is displayed, which the *munus* carries from its inception as its fiery and unapproachable nucleus. It is the *non-being individual* of the relation; the *continuum* that originates out of and to which we are drawn by a force that is directly counterposed to the instinct for survival; the wound that we cause or from which we emerge when we ourselves are changed when

we enter into a relation not only with the other but with the other of the other, he too the victim of the same irresistible expropriative impulse. This meeting, this *chance*, this contagion, more intense than any immunitarian cordon, is the community of those that manifestly do not have it, when not losing it, and losing themselves in the very same process of flowing away from it.<sup>51</sup> What this flow might mean, and above all if it doesn't risk, in turn, falling again upon a different but specular sacrificial logic, is the question on which the book closes. No answer is given except in the form of a further, final question: If existence cannot be sacrificed, how are we to think the originary opening to it?<sup>52</sup> How are we to fight the immunization of life without making it do death's work? How are we to break down the wall of the individual while at the same time saving the singular gift that the individual carries?