



Politics

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Restlessness and Rupture: The crisis of community in a turbulent world

In recent years political order has been under the pressure of new trends and events threatening the established rules and principles that defined liberal Democracies and implicitly the concept of community based on freedom, pluralism, participation, inclusion, as well as individual rights and human dignity. On one hand, this pressure comes from within, referring to mechanisms foreseen to assure the proper functioning of internal political procedures such as fair representation, efficient decision making and policy shaping, granting a clear sphere of legitimacy and trust. On the other, it comes from new social needs local authorities must respond to and, furthermore, from external factors such as new technology, new environmental challenges, new forms of communication and even new shapes of conflict. These transformations have led to blurred borders, novel waves of migration and even changes in the perception of national or group identity. The contemporary world has sometimes been identified as “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2000), but instead of more fluent movements in politics we have been witnessing stronger turbulence, winds of change in the traditional political landscape enhancing unrest, polarization and even rupture.

These drifts are challenging the idea of politics and, to some extent, the *polis*, the public sphere that has been connected since ancient times to the idea of the city as a forum for debate, rights, duties and civic participation. But the changes also affect the idea of “community” itself, a concept that must be reshaped and adjusted to a (brave) new interconnected and interdependent or global world. The crisis of politics is also a crisis of communities. This suggests that we live in a time of

re-evaluation of the meaning of community, not as simple local or public life, but as a complex realm of 'belonging.'

Communities have been distinguished precisely because of this cultural dimension strongly connected to common stories, language and memories, rather than exclusively to a set of principles of legal or political autonomy. To go a step further, communities have even been characterized by communitarian philosophers such as Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor or Michael Walzer as fundamental places of socialization and humanization, as the individual is seen as a "situated self" defined by its community and history (Sandel 1986) that provides a sort of "moral horizon" without which human identity would not be possible (Taylor 1989). In this conception, traditional community life was threatened both by the centrifugal forces of globalization and by the gradual isolation of the self in digital platforms, thus disconnecting people from concrete local awareness, from social bonds and responsibilities. Apparently, the same liberalism that fostered autonomy and self-awareness had led eventually to an excess of individualism, alienating individuals from the community and, by doing so, from their human essence.

Today these problems have become stronger regarding a more interdependent world, as well as the many inventions in the field of digitalization and AI. Accordingly, we could be tempted to ask if there is such a thing as a "global community" or a "virtual community" (considering avatars or IA generated players) if we insist on a necessary connection to a concrete experience of locality or to reality within a specific core of shared values. Taking on the former communitarian criticism to liberalism, Patrick Deenen has for example argued in a more recent essay that the liberal "self" (defined by absolute individual autonomy) has actually led to a breakdown of community and a sense of powerlessness. Therefore, he advocates for a return to local, '*polis*-like' communities where people are bound by shared culture and traditions rather than just legal contracts.

The presumption that there are only plural communities with diverse features and meanings, according to different local and cultural realities – but that it would not be possible to present a single and larger concept of community – has however many risks: in extreme, it allows to accept illiberal models of communities (as for example in China or Afghanistan), eliminating a free and robust civil society and giving up universal claims for human rights. Another misleading assumption is to expect that nationalism could or should make up for the shortcomings of

liberal politics (Yoram Hazony, 2018) by imposing top-down standards for community life (as recently in India) or offering simple solutions based on exclusion and boosted by polarization. However, these hidden agenda of authoritarian tools do not strengthen communities, on the contrary, they bring conflicts and violence absorbing all political life in one absolute national purpose.

Different solutions have been debated in order to overcome the scenario of a breakdown of community, but in our view some of the most interesting focus on the idea of an “inclusive communitarianism” (Tam 2019) defending that the community is not just a source of identity, but a necessary platform for “cooperative inquiry” understood as enhanced democratic participation and decision making, specifically aimed at tackling the feeling of uncertainty, disempowerment and exclusion. This also points to a middle way between liberalism and communitarianism in the sense of the imperative to preserve basic individual rights, while rebuilding a sort of 19th century ‘setup’ of community life such as associations, neighbourhoods, schools, town meetings, etc., based on a renewed consciousness of shared responsibility. In this framework, it would be conceivable to preserve distinct traditions and stories of unique identities without giving away the idea of common principles and values. In a world of unrest this more conciliating approach to the revitalization of communities will not be a walk in the park. But once endeavoured, it will probably lead to a more sustainable political landscape.

References

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