Immanent authority and the making of community: a response

Ian James*

Department of French, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

The attempt to think community today is necessarily marked by the legacy of communal belonging understood as a sharing of identity and the mobilization of totalizing figures, a legacy which, according to Jean-Luc Nancy, is irrevocably tainted by the experience of German National Socialist community. Nancy’s analysis of the ‘nothing’ or absent essence of community understood ontologically as ‘being-with’ poses the challenge of how we may come to think and produce community outside of any totalizing logic of shared identity and in the absence of transcendent figures of authority. Elaborating further on Nancy’s thinking of eco-technicity, this response argues that the key problem facing the Immanent Authority project is that of the techniques or modes by which the ‘nothing’ of community may be realized.

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‘Immanent Authority and the Making of Community’1: such a formulation arguably responds to a question which is necessarily and urgently raised when the term community is invoked today in any form. Any contemporary attempt to renew the analysis of community, its conceptualization, its affirmation, formation or instantiation cannot bypass or sidestep this question: namely, how can community, now, today, be thought at all without being recuperated into totalizing and exclusionary figures of identity, without returning to the violence and potential monstruity of a totalizing social and political project? Arendt’s (1973) analysis of totalitarianism is indispensable here insofar as she argued that the totalitarian political forms produced in the 1930s in the context of, for example, National Socialist notions of national community, were not simply the result of a German exceptionism but arose rather within the context of wider European culture and history, and more particularly, within the interdependent economic, social and political realities of pre-WWII Europe, that is to say capitalism, anti-Semitism and imperialism. The traditional notion of ‘community’ as an identitarian form is arguably irrevocably tainted by this legacy.2

Jean-Luc Nancy’s philosophical writing on community is an attempt to think the communal relation or formation beyond or in excess of its traditional metaphysical foundations and, specifically, beyond those grounding figures or myths by which community has traditionally sought to embody or instantiate itself as substance, as intimacy, and as the communication or sharing of an essence. This is an attempt to

*Email: irj20@cam.ac.uk

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think community as a form of absence, as a withdrawal from substance, plenitude, identity or presence. Community here is not a sharing of an essence or identity, but is rather an exposure to, or of, a nothing or empty space. This nothing or void can be understood as the space left vacant by the withdrawal of any transcendent principle or essence which would underpin, legitimate, or guarantee various forms of political organization or historical becoming (e.g. God, Man, the Monarch, the Nation, and so on). For Nancy, then, as for his friend and collaborator of the 1970s and 1980s, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, the ‘nothing’ of community is exposed in the wake of the withdrawal or retreat of political transcendence.

It is in this context, then, that Nancy comes to understand community ontologically as being-with understood as an absence or withdrawal of substance and essence, as the rending or irreducibly fragmentary exposure of what he calls singular plural being to absence. Put in different terms, community here, as being-with, is understood as the mass of singular beings or bodies that co-exist, but do so only in their exposure to this absence of essence, to the nothing of an infinite and ungraspable excess. This exposure of finitude to an infinite and irreducible excess is named and affirmed by Nancy in many different ways throughout his philosophical writing of the past 30 years. The task for Nancy’s commentators, and for any theoretical, and social or political thought or action which would, in a resolutely non-, or post-foundational manner, take his thinking of community as a starting point, would be to find new, different and regionally distributed ways of naming, affirming, forming and performing community as the nothing of an infinite excess, as the shared experience of an encompassed finitude. The task, precisely, is to articulate and think the nothing of community without, in Nancy’s own words, it ‘being returned to an all-powerful and all-present monstrosity’ (2001 p. 13).

This, at least, is one way of framing the question that is so urgently posed by any contemporary attempt to rethink the concept of community. It is a question to which the ‘Immanent Authority and Making of Community’ project responds, insofar as certain strands of this project have taken up the Nancian thinking of community and questions relating to the ‘retreat of the political’. Sam Kirmian’s discussion of governmentality and the politics of loss most directly takes up the Nancian challenge of articulating new forms of authority ‘from out of’, as it were, the nothing of community. His rich account of the retreat of the political in Nancy (and Lacoue-Labarthe) allows him to argue that new forms of authority may emerge, not from totalizing figures that occupy the exhausted place of political transcendence, but rather from the fragmentation of existing forms and from the gaps in interstices which inevitably open up when those existing forms fail to achieve their desired fulfiling, accomplishment, totalization, or closure. Herein lies the key philosophical insight and strength of the ‘Immanent Authority’ project, namely that articulations, figures and agencies of authority can emerge from what might be termed the ‘open immanence’ of shared material existence, an existence which is resolutely singular-plural in the Nancian sense, and therefore radically non-totalizable.

Similarly rich insights are developed in contributions to the thinking of immanent authority which draw less directly on Nancy’s formulations and more on those slightly, but not radically, different formulations of philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze or Jacques Rancière. Leila Dawney’s elaboration of ‘experiential authority’ gives a subtle account of the way in which experience can emerge as the source or site for the production of authority. Experience here, however, is crucially not understood in terms of the lived consciousness of a traditional subject, but rather as the flows of intensities and affects which mark or traverse singular bodies. In a manner which echoes Nancy’s thinking of community as ‘being-with’, the trans-individual and transpersonal sharing of intensities and affects across the singular plurality of embodied existence becomes a site from which singular figures of authority can emerge (e.g. Harry Patch and Doreen Lawrence). Similarly, and in a register more informed by Rancière’s thinking of equality and sense distribution, Naomi Millner comes to think authority as a production of experience understood in terms of a plurality of singular, material and embodied relations. For both Dawney and Millner authority is thought as emerging from a site which radically exceeds the metaphysical conception of a subject as a self-positioning, self-identical instance which is nevertheless subjected to transcendent figures of authority (God, Law, King, State etc.) and then bound together in a community of subjects on the basis of a shared identity and a shared subjection to a common transcendent principle.

In this context and in further response to the pressing questions posed here, two separate but interrelated points should be underlined.

Firstly, Nancy’s thinking of being-with as singular plurality or as the exposure to or of an infinite excess always engages sense, and what he will also at times call the infinity of sense. This is an irreducibly fragmentary, excessive, singular and pluralizing, of meaningfulness, the sense that a shared world or existence is. What Nancy calls the exposure or the ‘coming’ of sense, the opening and spacing of a shared world of meaningfulness, is neither a immanent nor transcendent, it is a ‘trans-immanence’, an exposure to and of infinite excess which is no kind of beyond but rather an opening and spacing of the meaningful, material, concrete world of shared existence.

Secondly, being-with as singular plurality and as an exposure or of to an infinity or trans-immanence of sense is always bound up with, or more precisely, articulated from within, an originary technicity. There is no co-existence, no excessive sharing of bodily finitude, without a trans-immanent articulation in and through an originary technè of sense, or what, after Nancy, one can also call the eco-technical spacing of bodily finitude. The articulation of community in the Nancian perspective, its affirmation, formation, instantiation or performance will always, therefore, engage material bodily existence, but with this also, an originary technicity, technics, eco-technicity, or the technè of sense (Nancy, 1993 p. 66).

This understanding of technicity, or of what one might call an originary or ontological order of technics, highlights what may be the most pressing question or problem faced by the ‘Immanent Authority’ project, namely the question concerning the material techniques by which the making of community can be accomplished and the effective means by which immanent authority may be realised. Julian Brigtstocke’s account of performance in relation to the avant-garde communities of late nineteenth-century Paris makes an important contribution to addressing this problem as do Leila Dawney’s analysis of the interface between ‘experiential authority’ and mediatisation and Naomi Millner’s account of contemporary forms of political activism.

However, the question of technique, or of the means by which immanent authority is articulated and efectuated remains an open one. What ‘technè’, what other techniques, arts, and technical or technological forms will allow the figure of
community to be both affirmed and at the same time maintained as absence or as absent essence?Posing the question in terms of techne or technics allows the Nancean question of eco-technical spacing, authority, and the making of community to be cast in terms of singular and productive techniques, or the multiple technicities of the exposure of singular-plural sense. This, in turn, opens up the possibility thinking authority and the making of community in terms of plural inventions and appropriations: those of artistic practice, performance and protest certainly, but other technicities and techniques, legal, political, and technological, all used in the production or affirmation of singular plural being and its exposure, the production of points of becoming which exceed existing forms, identities and structures. The production of immanent authority and the making of community, then, may be a matter of the appropriation of technicity, the invention of techniques and technical forms, and the eco-technical spacing of the excess of being-with.

Notes
1. This is the title of the symposium from which this special edition emerged – Immanent Authority and the Making of Community, June 2011, IAS University of Bristol, supported by the IAS Bristol, the University of Warwick and the AHRC as a part of the Connected Communities scheme.
2. The collaborative work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe offers a sustained analysis of this legacy of community. See for example, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe 1981; 1983, 1991). Nancy’s key work on this subject, La Communauté désemparée (1990) contains a sustained critique of the Nazi state as a project of totalizing identitarian community.
3. For extended discussions of this conception of community as an absent essence, the sharing of non-identity, or as the exposure to a void or absent space see Ian James 2005 (pp. 331–349, 2006 (pp.152–201) and 2010 (pp.171–187)
4. Nancy’s reworking of ontology as an ontology of excess in a trajectory of thought that builds on the legacy of French thinkers such as Maurice Blanchot, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida is the persistent task of all his thinking from the 1980s to the present day. See in particular Nancy1988, 1990, 1993 and 1996.

Note on contributor

References