

Editor's Review Column

Unavowable Communities

Greg Bird. *Containing Community: From Political Economy to Ontology in Agamben, Esposito and Nancy*. (SUNY Series in Contemporary Italian Philosophy). SUNY Press. New York. 2016. 249 pages.

Greg Bird and Jonathan Short (editors). *Community, Immunity and the Proper*. Routledge, London and New York. 2015. 167 pages.

Roberto Esposito. *The Origin of the Political: Hannah Arendt or Simone Weil?*. Translated by Vincenzo Binetti and Gareth Williams. (Commonalities). Fordham University Press, New York, 2017. 90 pages.

Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Disavowed Community*. Translated by Philip Armstrong. (Commonalities). Fordham University Press, New York, 2016. 107 pages.

Philosophical reflection on community is the historical and theoretical basis of most educational thought. What is a community? How does it utilise forms of education to sustain itself? How does it want to educate its young? How does it want to change? How does it relate to other communities? Does it, itself, contain many communities? Plato's *Republic* and Rousseau's *Emile*, leading into the *Social Contract*, are the primary examples of how philosophical reflection on community informs and is informed by educational thought. In our current moment, though, we are less likely to see philosophers of community concern themselves with the problem of education, even if philosophers of education find themselves engaging with it in passing, the communities they conceive are often defined more by political

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intention than a grounding in ontological conditions. Working out of a tradition reflections on community defined by French philosophers and writers Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Marguerite Duras, and Jean-Luc Nancy, the texts under review in this column (including a recent book by Nancy on Blanchot) show how those reflections have evolved and shifted over the last fifty years, as well as indicating how they have become notably prominent in contemporary Italian philosophy, especially in the work of Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito.

Greg Bird's *Containing Community: From Political Economy to Ontology in Agamben, Esposito and Nancy* is an outstanding introduction to and innovation on the latest developments in continental thinking on community. He clearly outlines the work of the three most prominent contemporary voices who emerged from this context with key texts in the 1990s, exploring the nuances in their thought and helpfully placing their thought in relation to one another. Introducing the text, Bird asks, 'what if community is no longer constituted through the collective appropriation and redistribution of property – that is, if being included and ultimately belonging are no longer determined by one's possession of common property?' (2). For Bird this is 'a problem of philosophy as much as of political economy' (3), and it does not take much to see that it is therefore also a problem for educational thought and practice. Can the concepts we use to think education operate in a community such as this? Is it possible to educate for such a community? What would such an education look like and what content and relations would it have to put to work to do so? Situating the book as much in political theory as ontology and biopolitics, the book begins with an extensive and original (in terms of its relation to the above thinkers) discussion of Pierre Joseph Proudhon's critique of property prejudice, followed by what Bird describes as 'an examination of Heidegger's thinking on the proper, especially his later formulations of the Ereignis.' (3). Although it is not Bird's stated aim, what follows includes what could be described as a disentanglement of Esposito's thought from the political weakness (101) in Nancy and the focus on extremes and perhaps even a recourse to 'lifestyle politics' (149) in Agamben. Esposito is shown to be more rigorous, expansive and practical in his ethical and political thought. To cite an important passage requires an imposition of the caveat that the terms Bird uses are fully explained in his text in a manner which would be inappropriate to repeat at length here; nonetheless:

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In [Esposito's] philosophy there is a direct relationship between his ethical ontology and politics. Politics are not left aside for the future (to come) or made possible in a particular ethos or way of being; instead, his affirmative biopolitics is supplemented by the ethical duty implied by the *munus*. In his republican model, communal duties and obligations, which are ontologically grounded, are prioritized over rights and interests. (190)

This philosophy might not only be productively applied to reflections on contemporary educational practice but also considered in terms of what non-proprietary forms of education might look like outside and beyond our current systems; an education which might reflect a community 'where sharing is not just a sharing out, but also a sharing with' (190). Equally, educational thought might be able to offer constructive critiques and expansions on this conception of community.

Bird and Jonathan Short's edited volume *Community, Immunity and the Proper: Roberto Esposito* is an excellent counterpart to Bird's monograph. Originally published as a 2013 special issue of the journal, *Angelaki*, the collected essays, including contributions from Esposito and Nancy, are framed by a careful and insightful introduction, which would be a good selection as a basic introduction to Esposito's thought more generally. The editors explain that 'each paper, in its own fashion, puts a question to Esposito regarding the political significance, or practicality, of his theory of *communitas*' and that 'what follows...represents the most comprehensive commentary on his work in the English language to date' (10). Apart from Nancy's perhaps overly-allusive and short contribution on 'Fraternity' (119-124), the standard of the chapters is high and they offer important insights from a variety of perspective, Anne O'Byrne's essay on '*Communitas* and the problem of women' is particularly notable in its opening up of Esposito's philosophy to feminist critique and development. O'Byrne imagines a 'sister volume' to Esposito's *Communitas*, which she calls '*Communitas: This Time with Sex and Women, or The Other Communitas*' (123), using its spectre as a means to problematize the absence of reflections on women in the political philosophers that Esposito engages with (Georges Bataille, Immanuel Kant, St Augustine, Thomas Hobbes), who mostly all *do* reflect on women. She summarizes her critique brilliantly (via readings of

Elizabeth Grosz and Luce Irigaray), writing that ‘a theory of community that does not encounter sexual difference seems to protect itself from engagement with all real difference’ (132). This helps to not only show how Esposito’s thinking still requires development, especially when it comes to ontologically significant difference, but also how relevant a vigilant feminist critique remains in philosophical thought today. Penelope Deutscher’s also outstanding chapter, ‘The Membrane and the Diaphragm: Derrida and Esposito on immunity, community, and birth’, shows how Jacques Derrida’s thinking (which she places almost on the edges of feminist critique through her mobilisation of ‘birth’) on immunity and especially the constituent auto-immunity of communities is necessary and affirmative, in a manner not sufficiently accounted for in Esposito’s thought.

In the light of these feminist critiques, it is perhaps not insignificant that one of Esposito’s most recently translated books (originally published in 1996) focuses on two female philosophers. However, *The Origin of the Political: Hannah Arendt or Simone Weil?*, is distinctly unconcerned with feminist issues and instead is directed by the following questions which open the book (but seem to have been written by someone other than Esposito, as the passage goes on to refer to him as one of Arendt and Weil’s ‘most subtle interpreters’), ‘Where does the political originate? What binds it to the terrible war of Troy that precedes it and to an extent determines it? What is its relation to freedom and evil? To justice and power?’ (xvii). These questions are preceded by a new preface by Roberto Esposito, written in 2014, which argues that for Arendt and Weil ‘origin does not exist’ (x). Through the thirteen short chapters of this book Esposito both opposes and relates Weil and Arendt’s thought, especially in relation to Homer’s *Iliad* and Friedrich Nietzsche. The readings are close and nuanced, offering little of any clear overarching theoretical formulations to draw from the book, even in terms of its stated concern with the ‘origin of the political’, which, of course, we immediately find out before the book even begins, does not exist. Although the readings focus on interesting and often unexplored aspects of Weil and Arendt’s thought, they are not consistently lucid enough to offer much sustenance to a reader who is not interested in or willing to wrestle with Esposito’s unconventional rhetorical strategy to be able to draw out the basic point that the political begins in conflict, on the metaphorical field of battle. On the final page of this small but dense book, Esposito draws out Weil’s thinking on the ‘hero’ in the

context of Arendt's reading of a (unnamed by Esposito, as far as I can tell) parable by Franz Kafka (although we are told it is from the collection titled *The Great Wall of China*):

Nothing is more illusory than the Western metaphysical "dream" of a region without time; an eternal presence, perfect stillness. This pathway is no longer feasible. It never has been. What is possible, then? All we can do is attempt something more risky but still miraculously open: to remain within the dimension of time and move along the diagonal that derives from the parallelogram formed by the two forces of conflict, originating in the point of coincidence and conflict between the past and future. (78)

This perhaps returns us to Bird's claim that Esposito's philosophy is more practical than many of his major contemporaries. We must learn to rest in the midst of conflict rather than seeking resolution. Educationalists are perhaps more intuitively sensitive to the conflictual relationship (in the space) between past and future, as their task is often defined by negotiating this relation, both in terms of knowledge and community. Might the rejection of the search of the origin of the political then lead us instead to a reflection on the stillness in the midst of conflict the educational moment?

From the same impressive Fordham University Press series, named Commonalities, as Esposito's book, is Jean-Luc Nancy's recent reflection on Maurice Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community* (1983), *The Disavowed Community*. Blanchot's text was, importantly, a response to what eventually became Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*. As such the layers upon layers present within the pages of this most recent book are as much a self-reflection on the part of Nancy as they are an engagement with Blanchot. In his translator's introduction, Philip Armstrong tells us that 'the reading is close enough that it would be instructive for the reader to have a copy of Blanchot's book available in order to follow more closely the exchanges and cross-references between the two texts' (xiv), which, while true, adds to the complexity of reading this book on its own merit. That said, there is plenty of illuminating theoretical sustenance to be found in these pages. Nancy's book opens with a lead into a wonderfully clear and allusive passage, channelling more his own thought than Blanchot's, he explains that, 'The common should be understood at once as the banal – that is, the element of a primordial equality irreducible to any effect of distinction – and,

indistinguishably, as shared, in other words, that which only takes place in and through relation.’ (1). In a formulation which returns us both thematically and conceptually to Bird’s reading of Esposito, Nancy argues that ‘Blanchot will have had two politics – one democratic, rebellious in the name of the law of justice beyond all law, the other aristocratic and anarchic, tied to the secret community of a lawless passion and a sharing of unshareable solitudes.’ (60). Can we not see both of these forms of politics operating at the hands of some educators? Educators whose task is to, somewhat anarchically as well as democratically, prefigure better worlds in the conversations, relations, and lessons of their classrooms? And educators who also understand that what is taught is never exactly what is learned? Nancy compares his own thinking on the common with Blanchot’s, for whom the instant of the common (which is also communication) ‘is identified with its own disappearance and so never takes place’, whereas, for Nancy, ‘it takes place as the infinitesimal suspension of time where gazes – voices, silence – are exchanged and bodies touch.’ (71-72). And earlier in the text, Nancy makes the claim that, ‘One thing is at least clearer in Blanchot than in my own work: “Politics” remained distinct from “community” as such.’ (11) Nancy provides a description of Blanchot’s thought which is, in many ways, clearer (perhaps to a fault?) than what Blanchot said on the subject, but does, without question, point towards key features of his disposition:

[Blanchot] removes politics [...], and he reserves, in the most profound way, a “community” in and of itself withdrawn from all determination, only binding itself through its own unbinding. In another sense, perhaps, he tightens the knot even further if “politics” must nevertheless be related to “community.” (34)

In this reading, politics, for Blanchot, proceeds from the binding and unbinding of anything ‘common’, which, while making his thought completely unavailable to fascism, does not necessarily always put it on the side of liberal democracy, especially in its crueller (for example, colonial) forms. Whether or not Nancy’s interpretation of Blanchot’s distinction between community and politics is correct (and I am inclined to say it is), he offers a way to return to Blanchot’s writing, and not only *The Unavowable Community*, in a manner which might provide significant resources for confronting and engaging in our contemporary moment, overdetermined by so many overlapping discourses, not least (white) nationalism,

populism, asylum, borders, trans-national political alliances, LGBTQ+, social equality, and structural racism. All of these topics – and the many more that it would not take long to also be struck by – have educational correlatives and implications. If we began to see all community as defined by its ‘constitutive’ binding and unbinding, and looked for a politics which followed from this condition, what might follow for, or be offered from, educational thought and practice?

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