The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference

Radical theorists and activists often appeal to an ideal of community as an alternative to the oppression and exploitation they argue characterize capitalist patriarchal society. Such appeals often do not explicitly articulate the meaning of the concept of community, but rather tend to evoke an affective value. Even more rarely do those who invoke an ideal of community as an alternative to capitalist patriarchal society ask what it presupposes or implies, or what it means concretely to institute a society that embodies community. I raise a number of critical questions about the meaning, presuppositions, implications and practical import of the ideal of community.

As in all conceptual reflection, in this case there is no universally shared concept of community, but only particular articulations that overlap, complement, or sit at acute angles to one another.[1] I shall rely on the definitions and expositions of a number of writers for examples of conceptualizations about community as a political ideal. All these writers share a critique of liberal individualist social ontology, and most think democratic socialism is the best principle of social organization. I claim acceptance for my analysis only within this general field of political discourse, though I suspect that much of the conceptual structure I identify applies to an ideal of community that might be appealed to by more conservative or liberal writers.

I criticize the notion of community on both philosophical and practical grounds. I argue that the ideal of community participates in what Derrida calls the metaphysics of presence or Adorno calls the logic of identity, a metaphysics that denies difference. The ideal of community presumes subjects who are present to themselves and presumes subjects can understand one another as they understand

themselves. It thus denies the difference between subjects. The desire for community relies on the same desire for social wholeness and identification that underlies racism and ethnic chauvinism, on the one hand, and political sectarianism on the other.

Insofar as the ideal of community entails promoting a model of face-to-face relations as best, it devalues and denies difference in the form of temporal and spatial distancing. The ideal of a society consisting of decentralized face-to-face communities is undesirably utopian in several ways. It fails to see that alienation and violence are not a function of mediation of social relations, but can and do exist in face-to-face relations. It implausibly proposes a society without the city. It fails to address the political question of the relations among face-to-face communities.

The ideal of community, finally, totalizes and detemporalizes its conception of social life by setting up an opposition between authentic and inauthentic social relations. It also detemporalizes its understanding of social change by positing the desired society as the complete negation of existing society. It thus provides no understanding of the move from here to there that would be rooted in an understanding of the contradictions and possibilities of existing society.

I propose that instead of community as the normative ideal of political emancipation, that radicals should develop a politics of difference. A model of the unoppressive city offers an understanding of social relations without domination in which persons live together in relations of mediation among strangers with whom they are not in community.

1. The Metaphysics of Presence

Western conceptualization, as expressed both in philosophical writing, other theoretical writing, and quite often everyday speech as well, exhibits what Derrida calls a metaphysics of presence and what Adorno calls a logic of identity.[2] This metaphysics consists in a desire to think things together in a unity, to formulate a representation of a whole, a totality. It seeks the unity of the thinking subject with the object thought, that the object would be a grasping of the real. This urge to unity seeks to think everything that is as a whole, or to describe some ontological region, such as social life, as a whole, a system. Such totalization need not be restricted to

synchronic conceptualization, moreover. The conceptualization of a process teleologically also exhibits the logic of identity, inasmuch as the end conceptually organizes the process into a unity.

The desire to bring things into unity generates a logic of hierarchical opposition. Any move to define an identity, a closed totality, always depends on excluding some elements, separating the pure from the impure. Bringing particular things under a universal essence, for example, depends on determining some attribute of particulars as accidental, lying outside the essence. Any definition or category creates an inside/outside distinction, and the logic of identity seeks to keep those borders firmly drawn. In the history of Western thought the metaphysics of presence has created a vast number of such mutually exclusive oppositions that structure whole philosophies: subject/object, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female. In the metaphysical tradition the first of these is elevated over the second because it designates the unified, the self-identical, whereas the second side lies outside the unified, the chaotic, unformed, transforming. Metaphysical thinking makes distinctions and formulates accounts by relying on such oppositions, where one side designates the pure, authentic, good, and the other the impure, inauthentic, bad.

The logic of identity also seeks to understand the subject, the person, as a self-identical unity. Beginning with Descartes, modern philosophy is particularly preoccupied with the unity of consciousness and its immediate presence to itself. The tradition of transcendental philosophy from Descartes through Kant to Husserl conceives the subject as a unity and an origin, the self-same starting point of thought and meaning, whose signification is never out of its grasp.

There are two sorts of criticisms Derrida, Adorno, Kristeva and others make of the metaphysics of presence. First, its effort to bring things into unity is doomed to failure. The claim to totality asserted by this metaphysics is incoherent, because, as I have already discussed, the process of totalizing itself expels some aspects of the entities. Some of the experienced particulars are expelled to an unaccounted for, "accidental" realm, what Derrida calls the supplement and Adorno calls the addendum. The move to create totality, as the logic of hierarchical opposition shows, creates not one, but two: inside and outside. The identity or essence sought receives its meaning and purity only by its relation to its outside. What Derrida

calls the method of deconstruction consists in showing how with a concept or category what it claims to exclude is implicated in it. Dialectical logic, of course, makes a similar claim. The method of deconstruction, or what Adorno calls negative dialectic, however, rejects the Hegelian method of dialectic. For Hegelian dialectic is the ultimate totalizer, bringing the oppositions generated by metaphysical logic into ultimate unity within a totality.

Second, the metaphysics of presence represses or denies difference. This term has come to carry a great deal of meaning in these philosophical accounts. As I understand it, difference means the irreducible particularity of entities, which makes it impossible to reduce them to commonness or bring them into unity without remainder. Such particularity derives from the contextuality of existence, the being of a thing and what is said about it is a function of its contextual relation to other things. Adorno in particular contrasts the logic of identity with entities in their particularity, which for him also means their materiality. Idealism, which Adorno thinks exhibits the logic of identity, withdraws from such particularity and constructs unreal essences.[3]

Derrida defines difference primarily in terms of the functioning of language, expressing the irreducible spatio-temporality of language. The sign signifies, has meaning, by its place in the chain of signs, by differing from other signs. Any moment of signification also defers, holds in abeyance, any completion of its meaning. Any utterance has a multiplicity of meanings and directions of interpretation and development in which it can be taken. For Derrida, the metaphysics of presence seeks to detemporalize and despatialize this signifying process, inventing the illusion of pure present meaning which eliminates the referential relation. This is idealism: conceiving the being and truth of things as lying outside time and change.[4]

Kristeva more often uses the term "heterogeneity" than difference, but like Derrida and Adorno suggests that a logic of identity represses heterogeneity, which she associates with the body as well as language. She too focuses on language and the process of signification, especially the speaking subject. The subject is never a unity, but always in process, for Kristeva, producing meaning through the play between the literal and figurative, representational and musical aspects that any speech simultaneously carries.[5]

Along with such writers as Anthony Giddens and Fred Dallmayr, I think the critique of the metaphysics of presence and the claim that

we need to attend to the irreducibility of difference have important implications for social philosophy and social theory.[6] I shall argue that the ideal of community exhibits the desire for unity these writers find in the metaphysics of presence. Community usually appears as one side of a dichotomy in which individualism is the opposite pole, but as with any such opposition, each side is determined by its relation to the other. I argue that the ideal of community exhibits a totalizing impulse and denies difference in two primary ways. First, it denies the difference within and between subjects. Second, in privileging face to face relations it seeks a model of social relations that are not mediated by space and time distancing. In radically opposing the inauthentic social relations of alienated society with the authentic social relations of community, moreover, it detemporalizes the process of social change into a static before and after structure.

2. The Opposition between Individualism and Community

Critics of liberalism frequently invoke a conception of community to project an alternative to the individualism and abstract formalism they attribute to liberalism.[7] This alternative social ontology rejects the image of persons as separate and self-contained atoms, each with the same formal rights, the rights to keep others out, separate. In the idea of community, critics of liberalism find a social ontology which sees the attributes of a person as coeval with the society in which he or she lives.

For such writers, the ideal of community evokes the absence of the self-interested competitiveness of modern society. In this ideal of community, critics of liberalism find an alternative to the abstract, formal methodology of liberalism. Existing in community with others entails more than merely respecting their rights, but rather attending to and sharing in the particularity of their needs and interests.

For example, in his critique of Rawls, Michael Sandel argues that liberalism's emphasis on the primacy of justice presupposes a self as an antecedent unity existing prior to its desires and goals, whole unto itself, separated and bounded. This is an unreal and incoherent conception of the self, he argues, better replaced by a constitutive conception of self as the product of an identity it shares with others, all of whom mutually understand and affirm one another. This constitutive conception of self is expressed by the concept of community.

> And insofar as our constitutive self-understandings comprehend a wider subject than the individual alone, whether a family or a tribe or a city or class or nation or people, to this extent they define a community in the constituitive sense. And what marks such a community is not merely a spirit of benevolence, or the prevalence of communitarian values, or even certain 'shared final ends' alone, but a common vocabulary of discourse and a background of implicit practices and understandings within which the opacity of persons is reduced if never finally dissolved. Insofar as justice depends for its pre-eminence on the separatedness and boundedness of persons in the cognitive sense, its priority would diminish as that opacity faded and those community values deepened.[8]

In contemporary political discussion, for the most part, the ideal of community arises in this way as a response to the individualism perceived as the prevailing theoretical position, and the alienation and fragmentation perceived as the prevailing condition of society. Community appears, that is, as part of an opposition, individualism/community, separated self/shared self. In this opposition each term comes to be defined by its negative relation to the other, thus existing in a logical dependency. I suggest that this opposition, however, is integral to modern political theory, and is not an alternative to it.

The opposition individualism/community receives one of its expressions in bourgeois culture in the opposition between masculinity and femininity. The culture identifies masculinity with the values associated with individualism—self-sufficiency, competition, separation, the formal equality of rights. The culture identifies femininity, on the other hand, with the values associated with community—affective relations of care, mutual aid, and cooperation.

Carol Gilligan has recently posed this opposition between masculine and feminine in terms of the opposition between two orientations on moral reasoning.[9] The "ethic of rights" that Gilligan takes to be typical of masculine thinking, emphasizes the separation of selves and the sense of fair play necessary to mediate the competition among such separated selves. The "ethic of care," on the other hand, which she takes to be typical of feminine thinking, emphasizes relatedness among persons, is an ethic of sympathy and affective attention to particular needs, rather than formal measuring of each according to universal rules. This ethic of care expresses the related-

ness of the ideal of community as opposed to the atomistic formalism of liberal individualism.

The opposition between individualism and community, then, is homologous with and often implies the oppositions masculine/feminine, public/private, calculative/affective, instrumental/aesthetic, which are also present in modern political thinking.[10] This thinking has always valued the first side of these oppositions more highly than the second, and provided them with a dominant institutional expression in the society. For that reason asserting the value of community over individualism, the feminine over the masculine, the aesthetic over the instrumental, the relational over the competitive, does have some critical force with respect to the dominant ideology and social relations. The oppositions themselves, however, arise from and belong to bourgeois culture, and for that reason merely reversing their valuation does not constitute a genuine alternative to capitalist patriarchal society.

Like most such oppositions, moreover, individualism and community have a common logic underlying their polarity, which makes it possible for them to define each other negatively. Each entails a denial of difference and desire to bring multiplicity and heterogeneity into unity, though in opposing ways. Liberal individualism denies difference by positing the self as a solid, self-sufficient unity, not defined by or in need of anything or anyone other than itself. Its formalistic ethic of rights denies difference by levelling all such separated individuals under a common measure of rights. Community, on the other hand, denies difference by positing fusion rather than separation as the social ideal. Community proponents conceive the social subject as a relation of unity composed by identification and symmetry among individuals within a totality. As Sandel puts it, the opacity of persons tends to dissolve as ends, vocabulary, and practices become identical. This represents an urge to see persons in unity with each other in a shared whole.

As is the case with many dichotomies, in this one the possibilities for social ontology and social relations appear to be exhausted in the two categories. For many writers, the rejection of individualism logically entails asserting community, and conversely any rejection of community entails that one necessarily supports individualism. In their discussion of the debate between Elshtain and Erenreich, for example, Sara Evans and Harry Boyte claim that Erenreich promotes individualism because she rejects the appeal to community

that Elshtain makes.[11] The possibility that there could be other conceptions of social organization does not appear because all possibilities have been reduced to the mutually exclusive opposition between individualism and community.

Ultimately, however, for most radical theorists the hard opposition of individualism and community breaks down. Unlike reactionary appeals to community which consistently assert the subordination of individual aims and values to the collective, most radical theorists assert that community itself consists in the respect for and fulfillment of individual aims and capacities. The neat distinction between individualism and community thus generates a dialectic in which each is a condition for the other.

3. Denying Difference within and between Subjects

In her interpretation of Marx's social ontology, Carol Gould formulates such a dialectical conception of community as the transcended synthesis of sociality and individuality. This ideal society of the future is realized as the third stage of a process of social evolution. The first stage is a communal society in which the individual is subjected to the collective and the second is the individualist society of capitalist alienation.

> The separate subjects who were related to each other only as objects, namely, as beings for another, now recognize themselves in these objects, or recognize these objects as like themselves. Therefore they recognize each other as subjects, and the unity between subjects and objects is reestablished in this recognition. The subjects are then related to each other not as alien external others, but as aspects of a common species subject. The relations are therefore internal, since they are the interrelations within this common or communal subject which is now no longer made up of discrete individuals in external relations, but rather of individuals who are unified in their common subjectivity. . . . The subjects are therefore mutually interdependent and the relations between them are internal because each subject is what it is—a subject—through its relation to the other, namely, through being recognized as a subject by the other. These individuals therefore form a communal but differentiated subject that expresses itself in and through each individual. The whole or unity that is reconsituted in

these internal relations among the individuals is thus mediated or differentiated by their individuality, but unified by their commonality.[12]

According to Derrida, dialectical logic represses difference not by bringing multiplicity under a simple universal, but by putting closure on the process of exteriorization. This closure emerges in the concept of a whole or totality within which opposites, differences, are reconciled and balanced.[13] Like many other expressions of this ideal of community, Gould's conception of community works on and through a totalizing desire to reconcile the differences of subjects.

This communitarian ideal participates in the metaphysics of presence because it conceives that subjects no longer need be exterior to one another. They need no longer outrun one another in directions they do not mutually understand and affirm. The ideal, moreover, extends this mutuality to its conception of the good society as a telos, an end to the conflict and violence of human interaction. Community here is conceived as a totality, in two ways. It has no ontological exterior, since it realizes the unity of general will and individual subjectivity. It also has no historical exterior, for there is no further stage to travel.

While she does not specifically speak of her ideal as community, Seyla Benhabib expresses a similar ideal of persons relating to one another through reciprocal recognition of subjectivities as a particular standpoint of moral autonomy. Liberalism holds a conception of moral autonomy she calls the "standpoint of the generalized other," which abstracts from the difference, desires and feeling among persons, to regard all as sharing a common set of formal rights and duties. In contrast, what Benhabib calls the "standpoint of the concrete other" views each person in his or her concrete individuality.

In assuming this standpoint, we abstract from what constitutes our commonality and seek to understand the other as he/she understands him/herself. We seek to comprehend the needs of the other, their motivations, what they search for and what they desire. Our relation to the other is governed by the norm of *complementary reciprocity:* each is entitled to expect and assume from the other forms of behavior through which the other feels recognized and confirmed as a concrete, individual being with specific needs,

talents and capacities. Our differences in this case complement rather than exclude one another.[14]

Benhabib's notion of the standpoint of the concrete other expresses community as the mutual and reciprocal understanding of persons, relating internally, as Gould puts it, rather than externally. Many other writers express a similar ideal of relating to other persons internally, understanding them from their point of view. In the quotation previously cited, Sandel poses the elimination of the opacity of other persons as the ideal for community. Isaac Balbus represents the goal of radical politics and the establishment of community as the overcoming of the 'otherness' of other in reciprocal recognition.[15] Roberto Unger articulates the ideal of community as the political alternative to personal love. In community persons relate to one another as concrete individuals who recognize themselves in each other because they have shared purposes. The conflict between the demands of individuality and the demands of sociability disappears in mutual sympathy.[16] Dorothy Allison proposes an ideal of community for feminists that is characterized by a "shared feeling of belonging and merging," with an "ecstatic sense of oneness."[17]

All these formulations seek to understand community as a unification of particular persons through the sharing of subjectivities: persons will cease to be opaque, other, not understood, and instead become fused, mutually sympathetic, understanding one another as they understand themselves. Such an ideal of shared subjectivity, or the transparency of subjects to one another, denies difference in the sense of the basic asymmetry of subjects. As Hegel first brought to focus and Sartre's analysis deepened, persons necessarily transcend each other because subjectivity is negativity. The regard of the other upon me is always objectifying. Other persons never see the world from my perspective, and I am always faced with an experience of myself I do not have in witnessing the other's objective grasp of my body, actions and words.

This mutual intersubjective transcendence, of course, makes sharing between us possible, a fact that Sartre notices less than Hegel. The sharing, however, is never complete mutual understanding and reciprocity. Sharing, moreover, is fragile. The other person may at the next moment understand my words differently from the way I meant them, or carry my actions to consequences I do not intend. The same difference that makes sharing between us possible

also makes misunderstanding, rejection, withdrawal, and conflict always possible conditions of social being.

The notion that each person can understand the other as he or she understands himself or herself, moreover, that persons can know other subjects in their concrete needs and desires, presupposes that a subject can know himself or herself and express that knowledge accurately and unambiguously to others. Such a concept of self-knowledge retains the Cartesian understanding of subjectivity basic to the modern metaphysics of presence. The idea of the self as a unified subject of desire and need and an origin of assertion and action has been powerfully called into question by contemporary philosophers.[18] I will rely on my reading of Julia Kristeva.

Without elaborating the linguistic detail in which she couches her notion of the subject-in-process, I will summarize briefly the general idea. Kristeva relies on a psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious to assert that subjectivity is heterogeneous, decentered. Consciousness, meaning and intention are only possible because the subject-in-process slips and surpasses its intentions and meanings. Any utterance, for example, not only has a literal meaning, but is laden with ambiguities, embodied in gesture, tone of voice, rhythm, that all contribute to the heterogeneity of its meaning without being intended. So it is with actions and interactions with other persons. What I say and do always has a multiplicity of meanings, ambiguities, plays, and these are not always coherent.[19]

Because the subject is not a unity, it cannot be present to itself, know itself. I do not always know what I mean, need, want, desire, because these do not arise from some ego as origin. Often I express my desire in gesture or tone of voice, without meaning to do so. Consciousness, speech, expressiveness, are possible only if the subject always surpasses itself, and is thus necessarily unable to comprehend itself. Subjects all have multiple desires that do not cohere, they attach layers of meanings to objects without always being aware of each layer or their connections. Consequently, any individual subject is a play of differences that cannot be comprehended.

If the subject is heterogeneous process, unable to be present to itself, then it follows that subjects cannot make themselves transparent, wholly present to one another. If each subject escapes its own comprehension and for that reason cannot fully express to another its needs and desires, then necessarily each subject also

escapes sympathetic comprehension by others. I cannot understand another as he or she understands himself or herself, because he or she does not completely understand himself or herself. Indeed, because other people's expression to me may outrun their own awareness or intention, I may understand certain aspects of them more fully than they.

Gould appeals to such an ideal of "common subjectivity" as an alternative to the commodification of persons she finds characteristic of capitalist domination. Her conceptualization suggests that only if persons understood one another "internally," as she puts it, would such domination be eliminated. While I certainly do not wish to deny that current social relations are full of domination and exploitation, conceiving the elimination of these conditions in terms of an impossible ideal of shared subjectivity can tend to deflect attention from more concrete analysis of the conditions of their elimination.

Not only does this ideal of shared subjectivity express an impossibility, but it has undesirable political implications. Political theorists and activists should distrust this desire for reciprocal recognition and identification with others, I suggest, because it denies difference in the concrete sense of making it difficult for people to respect those with whom they do not identify. I suggest that the desire for mutual understanding and reciprocity underlying the ideal of community is similar to the desire for identification that underlies racial and ethnic chauvinism.

In ordinary speech for most people in the U.S., the term community refers to the people with whom I identify in a locale. It refers to neighborhood, church, schools. It also carries connotations of ethnicity or race. For most people in the U.S., insofar as they consider themselves members of communities at all, a community is a group that shares a specific heritage, a common self-identification, a common culture and set of norms. In the U.S. today, identification as a member of such a community also often occurs as an oppositional differentiation from other groups, who are feared, or at best devalued. Persons identify only with some other persons, feel in community only with those, and fear the difference others confront them with because they identify with a different culture, history and point of view on the world.

Racism, ethnic chauvinism, and class devaluation, I suggest, grow partly from a desire for community; that is, from the desire to

understand others as they understand themselves and from the desire to be understood as I understand myself. Practically speaking, such mutual understanding can be approximated only within a homogeneous group that defines itself by common attributes. Such common identification, however, entails reference also to those excluded.[20] In the dynamics of racism and ethnic chauvinism in the U.S. today, the positive identification of some groups is often achieved by first defining other groups as the Other, the devalued semi-human. I do not claim that appeal to the ideal of community is itself racist. Rather, my claim is that such appeals, within the context of a racist and chauvinistic society, can validate the impulses that reproduce racist and ethnically chauvinistic identification.

The striving for mutual identification and shared understanding among those who seek to foster a radical and progressive politics, moreover, can and has led to denying or suppressing differences within political groups or movements. Many feminist groups, for example, have sought to foster relations of equality and reciprocity of understanding in such a way that disagreement, difference and deviation have been interpreted as a breech of sisterhood, the destruction of personal relatedness and community. There has often been strong pressure within women's groups for members to share the same understanding of the world and the same lifestyle, in addition to distributing tasks equally and rotating leadership. Such pressure has often led to group and even movement homogeneity—primarily straight, or primarily lesbian, primarily white, or primarily academic.[21] In recent years feminists, perhaps more seriously than any other progressive political groups, have discussed how their organizations and movement might become more heterogeneous and recognize difference. A continuing desire for mutual identification and reciprocity, however, hampers the implementation of a principled call for heterogeneity.

In a racist, sexist, homophobic society that has despised and devalued certain groups, it is necessary and desirable for members of those groups to adhere with one another and celebrate a common culture, heritage and experience. Even within such separatist movement, however, too strong a desire for unity can lead to repressing the differences within the group, or forcing some out: gays and lesbians from black nationalist groups, for example, or feminists from native American groups, and so on.

Many other progressive political organizations and movements

founder on the same desire for community. Too often people in political groups take mutual friendship to be a goal of the group, and thus find themselves wanting as a group when they do not achieve such commonality.[22] Such a desire for community often channels energy away from the political goals of the group, and also produces a clique atmosphere which keeps groups small and turns potential members away. A more acceptable politics would acknowledge that members of an organization do not understand one another as they understand themselves, and would accept this distance without closing it into exclusion.

4. Denial of Difference as Time and Space Distancing

Many political theorists who put forward an ideal of community specify small group, face-to-face relations as essential to the realization of that ideal. Peter Manicas expresses a version of the ideal of community that includes this face-to-face specification.

> Consider an association in which persons are in face-to-face contact, but where the relations of persons are not mediated by "authorities," sanctified rules, reified bureaucracies or commodities. Each is prepared to absorb the attitudes, reasoning and ideas of others and each is in a position to do so. Their relations, thus, are open, immediate and reciprocal. Further, the total conditions of their social lives are to be conjointly determined with each having an equal voice and equal power. When these conditions are satisfied and when as a result, the consequences and fruits of their associated and independent activities are perceived and consciously become an object of individual desire and effort, then there is a democratic community.[23]

Roberto Unger argues that community requires face-to-face interaction among members within a plurality of contexts. To understand other people and to be understood by them in our concrete individuality, we must not only work together, but play together, take care of children together, grieve together, and so on.[24] Christian Bay envisions the good society as founded upon small face-to-face communities of direct democracy and many sided interaction.[25] Michael Taylor specifies that in a community relations among members must be direct and many-sided. Like Manicas, he asserts

that relations are direct only when they are unmediated by representatives, leaders, bureaucrats, state institutions or codes.[26] While Gould does not specify face-to-face relations as necessary for community, some of her language suggests that community can only be realized in such face-to-face relations. In the institutionalization of democratic socialism, she says, "social combination now becomes the *immediate* subjective relations of mutuality among individuals. The relations again become *personal* relations as in the pre-capitalist stage, but no longer relations of domination and no longer mediated, as in the second stage, by external objects."[27]

I take there to be several problems with the privileging of face-to-face relations by theorists of community. It presumes an illusory ideal of unmediated social relations, and wrongly identifies mediation with alienation. It denies difference in the sense of time and space distancing. It implies a model of the good society as consisting of decentralized small units which is both unrealistic and politically undesirable. And finally, it avoids the political question of the relation among the decentralized communities.

All the writers cited above give primacy to face-to-face presence because they claim that only under those conditions can the social relations be *immediate*. I understand them to mean several things by social relations that are immediate. They are direct, personal relations, in which each understands the other in her or his individuality. This is an extension of the ideal of mutual understanding I have criticized in the previous section. Immediacy also here means relations of co-presence in which persons experience a simultaneity of speaking and hearing, and are in the same space, that is, have the possibility to move close enough to touch.[28]

This ideal of the immediate presence of subjects to one another, however, is a metaphysical illusion. Even a face-to-face relation between two is mediated by voice and gesture, spacing and temporality. As soon as a third person enters the interaction the possibility arises of the relation between the first two being mediated through the third, and so on. The mediation of relations among persons by the speech and actions of still other persons is a fundamental condition of sociality. The richness, creativity, diversity and potential of a society expand with growth in the scope and means of its media, linking persons across time and distance. The greater the time and distance, however, the greater the number of persons who stand between other persons.

The normative privileging of face-to-face relations in the ideal of community seeks to suppress difference in the sense of the time and space distancing of social processes, which material media facilitate and enlarge. Such an ideal dematerializes its conception of interaction and institutions. For all social interaction takes place over time and across space. Social desire consists in the urge to carry meaning, agency, and the effects of agency, beyond the moment and beyond the place. As laboring subjects we separate the moment of production from the moment of consumption. Even societies confined to a limited territory with few institutions and a small population devise means of their members communicating with one another over distances, means of maintaining their social relationships even though they are not face to face. Societies occupy wider and wider territorial fields and increasingly differentiate their activity in both space, time and function, a movement that of course accelerates and takes on qualitatively specific form in modern industrial societies.[29]

I suggest that there are no conceptual grounds for considering face-to-face relations more pure, authentic social relations than relations mediated across time and distance. For both face-to-face and non-face-to-face relations are mediated relations, and in both there is as much the possibility of separation and violence as there is communication and consensus. Theorists of community are inclined to privilege face-to-face relations, I suggest, because they wrongly identify mediation and alienation.

By alienation, I mean a situation in which persons do not have control either over their actions, the conditions of their action, or the consequences of their action, due to the intervention of other agents.[30] Social mediation is a condition for the possibility of alienation in this sense; media make possible the intervention of agents between the conditions of a subject's action and the action, or between a subject's action and its consequences. Thus media make domination and exploitation possible. In modern society the primary structures creating alienation and domination are bureaucracy and commodification of all aspects of human activity, including and especially labor. Both bureaucracy and commodification of social relations depend on complex structures of mediation among a large number of persons.

That mediation is a necessary condition of alienation, however, does not entail the reverse implication: that only by eliminating structures of mediation do we eliminate alienation. If temporal and

spatial distancing are basic to social processes, and if persons always mediate between other persons to generate social networks, then a society of immediacy is impossible. While mediation may be a necessary condition for alienation, it is not sufficient. Alienation is that specific process of mediation in which the actions of some serve the ends of others without reciprocation and without being explicit, and this requires coercion and domination.

By positing a society of immediate face-to-face relations as ideal, community theorists generate a dichotomy between the "authentic" society of the future and the "inauthentic" society we live in, which is characterized only by alienation, bureaucratization, and degradation. Such a dichotomization between the inauthentic society we have and the authentic society of community, however, detemporalizes our understanding of social change. On this understanding social change, revolution, consists in the complete negation of this society and the establishment of the truly good society. In her scheme of social evolution, Gould conceives of "the society of the future" as the negated sublation of capitalist society. This understands history not as temporal process, but as divided into two static structures: the before of alienated society and the after of community.

The projection of the ideal of community as the radical other of existing society denies difference in the sense of the contradictions and ambiguities of social life. Instead of dichotomizing the pure and the impure into two stages of history or two kinds of social relations, a liberating politics should conceive the social process in which we move as a multiplicity of actions and structures which cohere and contradict, some of them exploitative and some of them liberating. The polarization between the impure, inauthentic society we live in and the pure, authentic society we seek to institute, detemporalizes the process of change, because it fails to articulate how we move from one to the other. If institutional change is possible at all, it must begin from intervening in the contradictions and tensions of existing society. No telos of the final society exists, moreover; society understood as a moving and contradictory process implies that change for the better is always possible and always necessary.

The requirement that genuine community embody face-to-face relations, when taken as a model of the good society, carries a specific vision of social organization. Since the ideal of community demands that relations between members be direct and many-sided,

the ideal society is composed of small locales, populated by a small enough number of persons so that each can be personally acquainted with all the others. For most writers this implies that the ideal social organization is decentralized, with small scale industry and local markets. Each community aims for economic self-sufficiency, and each democratically makes its own decisions about how to organize its working and playing life.

I do not doubt the desirability of small groups in which individuals have personal acquaintance with one another and interact in a plurality of contexts. Just as the intimacy of living with a few others in the same household has unique dimensions that are humanly valuable, so existing with others in communities of mutual friendship has specific characteristics of warmth and sharing that are humanly valuable. Furthermore, there is no question that capitalist patriarchal society discourages and destroys such communities of mutual friendship, just as it squeezes and fragments families. In our vision of the good society we surely wish to include institutional arrangements that would nurture the specific experience of mutual friendship which only relatively small groups interacting in a plurality of contexts can produce. Recognizing the specific value of such face-to-face relations, however, is quite a different matter from proposing them as the organizing principle of a whole society.

Such a model of the good society as composed of decentralized, economically self-sufficient face-to-face communities functioning as autonomous political entities is both wildly utopian and undesirable. To bring it into being would require dismantling the urban character of modern society, a gargantuan physical overhaul of living space, workplaces, places of trade and commerce. A model of a transformed better society must in some concrete sense begin from the concrete material structures that are given to us at this time in history, and in the United States these are large-scale industry and urban centers. The model of society composed of small communities is not desirable, at least in the eyes of many. If we take seriously the way many people live their lives today, it appears that people enjoy cities, that is, places where strangers are thrown together.

One final problem arises from the model of face-to-face community taken as a political goal. This model of the good society as usually articulated leaves completely unaddressed the question of how such small communities are to relate to one another. Frequently the ideal projects a level of self-sufficiency and decentralization

which suggests that proponents envision few relations among the decentralized communities except those of friendly visits. But surely it is unrealistic to assume that such decentralized communities need not engage in extensive relations of exchange of resources, goods and culture. Even if one accepts the notion that a radical restructuring of society in the direction of a just and humane society entails people living in small democratically organized units of work and neighborhood, this has not addressed the important political question: how will the relations among these communities be organized so as to foster justice and prevent domination? When we raise this political question the philosophical and practical importance of mediation reemerges. Once again politics must be conceived as a relationship of strangers who do not understand one another in a subjective and immediate sense, relating across time and distance.

5. City Life and the Politics of Difference

I have claimed that radical politics must begin from historical givens, and conceive radical change not as the negation of the given, but rather as making something good from many elements of the given. The city, as a vastly populated area with large scale industry and places of mass assembly, is for us a historical given, and radical politics must begin from the existence of modern urban life. The material surroundings and structures available to us define and presuppose urban relationships. The very size of populations in our society and most other nations of the world, coupled with a continuing sense of national or ethnic identity with millions of other people, all support the conclusion that a vision of dismantling the city is hopelessly utopian.

Starting from the given of modern urban life is not simply necessary, moreover, it is desirable. Even for many of those who decry the alienation, massification and bureaucratization of capitalist patriarchal society, city life exerts a powerful attraction. Modern literature, art and film have celebrated city life, its energy, cultural diversity, technological complexity, and the multiplicity of its activities. Even many of the most staunch proponents of decentralized community love to show visiting friends around the Boston, or San Francisco or New York in which they live, climbing up towers to see the glitter of lights and sampling the fare at the best ethnic restaurants. For many people deemed deviant in the closeness of the face-to-face community in which they lived, whether "inde-

pendent" women or socialists or gay men and lesbians, the city has often offered a welcome anonymity and some measure of freedom.[31] To be sure, the liberatory possibilities of capitalist cities have been fraught with ambiguity.

Yet I suggest that instead of the ideal of community we begin from our positive experience of city life to form a vision of the good society. Our political ideal is the unoppressive city. In sketching this ideal, I assume some material premises. We will assume a productivity level in the society that can meet everyone's needs, and a physical urban environment that is cleaned up and renovated. We will assume, too, that everyone who can work has meaningful work and those who cannot are provided for with dignity. In sketching this ideal of city life, I am concerned to describe the city as a *kind of relationship* of people to one another, to their own history and one another's history. Thus by "city" I am not referring only to those huge metropolises that we call cities in the U.S. The kinds of relationship I describe obtain also ideally in those places we call "towns," where perhaps 10 or 20 thousand people live.

As a process of people's relating to one another, city life embodies difference in all the senses I have discussed in this essay. The city obviously exhibits the temporal and spatial distancing and differentiation I have argued the ideal of community seeks to collapse. On the face of the city environment lies its history and the history of the individuals and groups that have dwelt within it. Such physical historicity, as well as the functions and groups that live in the city at any given time, create its spatial differentiation. The city as a network and sedimentation of discretely understood places, such as particular buildings, parks, neighborhoods, and as a physical environment offers changes and surprises in transition from one place to another.

The temporal and spatial differentiation that mark the physical environment of the city produce an experience of aesthetic *inexhaustibility.* Buildings, squares, the twists and turns of streets and alleys, offer an inexhaustible store of individual spaces and things, each with unique aesthetic characteristics. The juxtaposition of incongruous styles and functions that usually emerge after a long time in city places contributes to this pleasure in detail and surprise. This is an experience of difference in the sense of always being inserted. The modern city is without walls; it is not planned and coherent. Dwelling in the city means always having a sense of

beyond, that there is much human life beyond my experience going on in or near these spaces, and I can never grasp the city as a whole.

City life thus also embodies difference as the contrary of the face-to-face ideal expressed by most assertions of community. City life is the "being-together" of strangers. Strangers encounter one another, either face to face or through media, often remaining strangers and yet acknowledging their contiguity in living and the contributions each makes to the others. In such encountering people are not "internally" related, as the community theorists would have it, and do not understand one another from within their own perspective. They are externally related, they experience each other as other, different, from different groups, histories, professions, cultures, which they do not understand.

The public spaces of the city are both an image of the total relationships of city life and a primary way those relationships are enacted and experienced. A public space is a place accessible to anyone, where people engage in activity as individuals or in small groups. In public spaces people are aware of each other's presence and even at times attend to it. In a city there are a multitude of such public spaces, streets, restaurants, concert halls, parks. In such public spaces the diversity of the city's residents come together and dwell side by side, sometimes appreciating one another, entertaining one another, or just chatting, always to go off again as strangers. City parks as we now experience them often have this character.

City life implies a social inexhaustibility quite different from the ideal of the face-to-face community in which there is mutual understanding and group identification and loyalty. The city consists in a great diversity of people and groups, with a multitude of sub-cultures and differentiated activities and functions, whose lives and movements mingle and overlap in public spaces. People belong to distinct groups or cultures, and interact in neighborhoods and workplaces. They venture out from these locales, however, to public places of entertainment, consumption and politics. They witness one another's cultures and functions in such public interaction, without adopting them as their own. The appreciation of ethnic foods or professional musicians, for example, consists in the recognition that these transcend the familiar everyday world of my life.

In the city strangers live side by side in public places, giving to and receiving from one another social and aesthetic products, often mediated by a huge chain of interactions. This instantiates social

relations as difference in the sense of an understanding of groups and cultures that are different, with exchanging and overlapping interactions that do not issue in community, yet which prevent them from being outside of one another. The social differentiation of the city also provides a positive inexhaustibility of human relations. The possibility always exists of becoming acquainted with new and different people, with different cultural and social experience; the possibility always exists for new groups to form or emerge around specific interests.

The unoppressive city is thus defined as openness to unassimilated otherness. Of course, we do not have such openness to difference in our current social relations. I am asserting an ideal, which consists in a politics of difference. Assuming that group differentiation is a given of social life for us, how can the relationships of group identities embody justice, respect and the absence of oppression? The relationship among group identities and cultures in our society is blotted by racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, suspicion and mockery. A politics of difference lays down institutional and ideological means for recognizing and affirming differently identifying groups in two basic senses: giving political representation to group interests and celebrating the distinctive cultures and characteristics of different groups.[32]

Many questions arise in proposing a politics of difference. What defines a group that deserves recognition and celebration? How does one provide representation to group interests that avoids the mere pluralism of liberal interest groups? What are institutional forms by which the mediations of the city and the representation of its groups in decision making can be made democratic? These questions, as well as many others, confront the ideal of the unoppressive city. They are not dissimilar from questions of the relationships that ought to exist among communities. They are questions, however, which appeal to community as the ideal of social life appears to repress or ignore. Some might claim that a politics of difference does express what the ideal of community ought to express, despite the meaning that many writers give the concept of community. Fred Dallmayr, for example, reserves the term community for just this openness toward unassimilated otherness, designating the more totalistic understandings of social relations I have criticized as either "communalism" or "movement."

> As opposed to the homogeneity deliberately fostered in the movement, the communitarian mode cultivates diversity—but without encouraging willful segregation or the repressive preponderance of one of the social subsectors. . . . Community may be the only form of social aggregation which reflects upon, and makes room for, otherness or the reverse side of subjectivity (and inter-subjectivity) and thus for the play of difference—the difference between ego and Other and between man and nature.[33]

In the end it may be a matter of stipulation whether one chooses to call such politics as play of difference "community." Because most articulations of the ideal of community carry the urge to unity I have criticized, however, I think it is less confusing to use a term other than community rather than to redefine the term. Whatever the label, the concept of social relations that embody openness to unassimilated otherness with justice and appreciation needs to be developed. Radical politics, moreover, must develop discourse and institutions for bringing differently identified groups together without suppressing or subsuming the differences.[34]

Notes

1. I examine community specifically as a normative ideal designating how social relations ought to be organized. There are various non-normative uses of the term community to which my analysis does not apply. Sociologists engaged in community studies, for example, usually use the term to mean something like "small town" or "neighborhood," and use the term primarily in a descriptive sense. The questions raised apply to community understood only as a normative model of ideal social organization. See Jessie Bernard, *The Sociology of Community,* (Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1973), for a summary of different sociological theories of community in its non-normative senses.
2. The texts of these authors I am relying on primarily are, Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Adorno, *Negative Dialectics,* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1973); Kristeva, *Polylogue,* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1977). These three writers have a similar critique of Western metaphysics. Several writers have noted similarities between Adorno and Derrida in this regard. See Fred Dallmayr, *Twilight of Subjectivity: Contributions to a Post-Structuralist Theory of Politics,* (Amherst,

MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), pp. 107–14, pp. 127–36; and Michael Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction,* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 73–81. For an account that draws some parallel between Kristeva and Adorno in this respect, see Drucilla Cornell and Adam Thurschwell, "Feminism, Negativity and Intersubjectivity," *Praxis International,* (1986). My account of metaphysics of presence is based on my reading of these three writers, but I do not claim to be "representing" what they say. Nor in this paper am I claiming to appropriate all these writers say for social theory. While I do regard the critique of the ideal of community I engage in here loosely as a deconstructive critique along the lines of Derrida's method, I part ways with him and some of the other post structuralists insofar as I think that it is both possible and necessary to pose alternative conceptualizations. Doing so is, of course, always a positing, and hence excludes and demarks, thus always itself open to the possibility of deconstructive critique.

3. See Adorno, *Negative Dialectics,* Part Two, pp. 134–210.
4. Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* p. 12–87.
5. Kristeva, *Polylogue,* "Le sujet en proces," pp. 55–106; "L'experience et la pratique," pp. 107–36; "Matiere, sense, dialectique," pp. 263–86.
6. Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 28–40; Dallmayr, *Twilight of Subjectivity,* pp. 107–15.
7. See R.P. Wolff, *The Poverty of Liberalism,* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), Chapter five.
8. Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 172–73.
9. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).
10. I develop more thoroughly the implications of these oppositions in modern political theory and practice and a practical vision of their unsettling in my paper, "Impartiality and the Civic Public: Some Implications of Feminist Critics of Modern Political Theory," *Praxis International* (1986).
11. Harry C. Boyte and Sara M. Evans, "Strategies in Search of America: Cultural Radicalism, Populism, and Democratic Culture," *Socialist Review* (May to August 1984): 73–100.
12. Carol Gould, *Marx's Social Ontology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978), p. 9.
13. Michael Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction,* pp. 65–71.
14. Seyla Benhabib, "Communicative Ethics and Moral Autonomy," presented at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association,

Eastern Division, December 1982; see also "The Generalized and the Concrete Other: Toward a Feminist Critique of Substitutionalist Universalism," *Praxis International (1986)*.

15. Isaac Balbus, *Marxism and Domination,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
16. Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Knowledge and Politics,* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), pp. 220–22.
17. Dorothy Alison, "Weaving the Web of Community," *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* 4 (1978): 79.
18. Michael Sandel, in the work already cited, levels a powerful critique against Rawls by arguing that his theory of justice presupposes a self as separated from and prior to the actions it undertakes, as its unified origin. Sandel gives several arguments showing the incoherence of such a conception of the unified self prior to the context of action.
19. Kristeva, "Le sujet en proces," *Polylogue,* pp. 55–106.
20. Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* is a classic statement on this dynamic of inclusion and exclusion. For another statement referring specifically to the exclusionary aspects of attempts to found communities, see Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 52–53.
21. See Francine Rainone, "Community, Politics and Spirituality," paper presented at a conference on Feminism and Psychology, Boston, MA, February 1984; Jana Sawicki, "Foucault and Feminism: Towards a Politics of Difference," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* (1986).

    See also Audre Lorde, essays in *Sister Outsider,* (Trumansburg, NH: The Crossing Press, 1984), especially "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," and "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference."
22. Wini Breines documents this urge to mutual friendship and some of the disappointments that followed from it in the student movement in the 1960's. See *Community and Organization in the New Left: 1962–68,* (South Hadley, MA: J.F. Bergin Publishers, 1982), especially Chapter 4.
23. Peter Manicas, *The Death of the State,* (New York: C.P. Putnam and Sons, 1974), p. 247.
24. Unger, *Knowledge and Politics,* pp. 262–63.
25. Christian Bay, *Strategies of Political Emancipation,* (South Bend: Notre Dame Press, 1981), Chapters 5 and 6.
26. Michael Taylor, *Community, Anarchy and Liberty,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 27–28.
27. Gould, *Marx's Social Ontology,* p. 26.

28. Derrida discusses the illusory character of this ideal of immediate presence of subjects to one another in community in his discussions of Levi-Strauss and Rousseau. See *Of Grammatology,* pp. 101–40.
29. See Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory,* pp. 198–233.
30. For a useful account of alienation, see Richard Schmitt, *Alienation and Class,* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1983), especially Chapter 5. In this book Schmitt, like many other of the writers I have cited, takes community to stand as the negation of the society of alienation. Unlike those writers discussed in this section, however, he does not take face-to-face relations as a condition of community. To the degree that he makes a pure/impure distinction, and exhibits the desire for unity I have criticized, however, the critique articulated here applies to Schmitt's appeal to the ideal of community.
31. Marshall Berman presents a fascinating account of the attractions of city life in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air,* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982). George Shulman points to the open-endedness of city life as contrasted with the pastoral vision of community in "The Pastoral Idyll of *Democracy,*" in *Democracy* 3 (1983): 43–54; for a similar critique, see David Plotke, "Democracy, Modernization, and *Democracy,*" *Socialist Review* 14 (March–April 1984): 31–56.
32. In my previously cited paper, "Impartiality and the Civic Public," I formulate some ideals of a heterogeneous public life; I have developed further some principles of a politics of difference in "Elements of a Politics of Difference," paper presented at the North American Society for Social Philosophy, Colorado Springs, August 1985.
33. Dallmayr, *Twilight of Subjectivity,* pp. 142–143.
34. I am grateful to David Alexander, Ann Ferguson, Roger Gottlieb, Peter Manicas, Peter Onuf, Lucius Outlaw, Michael Ryan, Richard Schmitt, Ruth Smith, Tom Wartenburg, and Hugh Wilder for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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