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Good Community

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The desire for community exists everywhere. It can be seen particularly clearly under conditions of constant social conflict, such as have been created by contemporary, that is, so-called late or deregulated, capitalism, in which the mechanism of competition has been elevated into a leading and unquestionable principle. While such competition may improve economic efficiency, it likewise conduces to feelings of isolation, and in particular to the loss of a sense of security, and to a state of uncertainty. It has deleterious effects both on the psychological life of individuals, and on the state of entire societies. On an individual level, we become convinced that every other person is a potential enemy, which leads to an increase in mistrust and to the feeling that we can rely only upon ourselves; on the level of society, there is a decline in civic solidarity and the first symptoms of social *anomie*, that is, the lack of a common set of assumptions about values constitutive of the society as a whole. Contributing to this state of affairs is currently the dominant ideology of consumerism, according to which the highest value is attached to the possession and consumption of material goods. The consumer is, however, isolated in his role in the market, because consumption is an activity which does not create any authentic community, but at most leads to a mass of isolated individuals who have together succumbed to the pressures of uniform consumption imperatives. We become a collectivity

of workers-clients-consumers, who bump into each other individually and randomly in the capitalist marketplace, in the public sphere, and in contact with the administrative organs of the state. A further factor in this process of social atomization is the rise of the phenomena of pluralism, privatization and cultural relativism, which have accompanied the modernization processes of Western society. Instead of the already-formed worldviews and social conventions that once bound and united traditional communities that were once accepted unreflectively by their members, we are now ever more frequently dealing with the process of custom-designing one's outlook, in which one creates one's own worldview and even, identity from an assortment of prefabricated social and cultural material, in the spirit of the popular slogan "do-it-yourself." Many sociologists have credited this process with an increase in individual liberty and autonomy, but at the same time it leads to a rise in feelings of isolation and alienation.

All the foregoing factors have led to the appearance of a longing for the kind of communal ties that might give us a sense of rootedness, human warmth and psychological security. In such a community it is felt that we do not need to engage in a continuous struggle, that we do not need to prove anything, but that we can simply be, and that we are valued and esteemed not for our social role or achievements, but simply by virtue of the fact that we exist.

Our need for a sense of community is most frequently fulfilled by the family. The more threatening external conditions come to appear, the higher we value the bonds of the family and above all, the atmosphere of trust that we find within the family structure. This recourse does not, however, suffice for everybody. Some aspire to a larger sense of community, in which they might feel like members of a family which is recapitulated on a broader scale and in which they could escape from a sense of social, psychological, or existential isolation.

A community is a collection of people who share a perceptible bond which results from their holding certain convictions in common that have a basically axiological character (above all concerning ethics and worldview), and who, thanks to being members of that community, are able to meet various needs that are important to their psychological, spiritual or material well-being. We are speaking of "community" in the full sense of the word only when we are dealing with a group of people who are fully conscious of the bonds that link them together. Such a community might be termed a "proper community" or a "community-for-itself." A "partial community" or a "community-in-itself" would, on the other hand, be a community whose members do not realize or understand the bonds that connect them, such that this lack of self-consciousness had a significant impact on their behaviour and way of thinking. I consider the passage from "community-in-itself" to "community-for-itself"

to be a key element in the collective learning process – or, to put it another way, in the process of collective maturation.

I would now like to present ten points outlining the features of what I take to be a good community. By "good community" I understand a community that is oriented towards the achievement of both individual and social welfare. At the same time I recognize that the process of evaluation when it comes to the categories of good and bad is itself derived from certain axiological assumptions typical for western culture at its best, but, I am convinced, not only for that culture. There might indeed exist (and in fact there have existed and do exist) communities, which although meet the criteria referred to above and also fulfill the perceivable needs of their members, do not realize the common good according to very generally accepted understandings of what is good and what is bad. A classic example of such a community would be what is referred to as the Mafia. Not every proper community is worthy of approbation, which is worth bearing in mind when we are considering the value of the community as such.

A good community, then, is a community which is:

1. Constructive, and not organic; namely, it is a collectivity which respects the autonomy of the individual, being modeled more upon a group of friends rather than on the family. The community is a result of the free choices of constitutive individuals and not a necessity resulting from some inherent bonds (e.g. those of blood, race, or place of birth). Furthermore, it openly acknowledges its notional character; in other words, it views itself as the result of conscious actions that were directed towards constituting it, or equally as the valuable and praiseworthy outcome of a fortunate set of circumstances. It does not view itself as a product of necessity of any kind and thus, not as something which enforces unity at all costs. Harmony, in a good community is not due to the maintenance of predetermined subjects in predetermined locations where they are to fulfill predetermined roles. Rather, harmony, in a good community occurs due to a continuous process of mediation in the relations and positions of individuals and the connections between them, mediation that articulates their various views and needs. In such a community, internal criticism is understood as a natural expression of care for the common good and not as a betrayal of it.

2. Just; that is to say, one which gives everyone equal chances for self-enhancement and does not mete out penalties or rewards undeservedly (that is, in a way contrary to the conception of justice of its members). It avoids arbitrariness in its distribution of penalty and reward, thus building trust in the stability, transparency and consistency of its operating principles. Such a community de-

mands of its members that they likewise observe principles of justice in their dealings with one another and in this way, a just community of just individuals is fostered.

3. Communal; with the meaning that its members feel themselves to be in solidarity with each other and responsible for one another. Consequently they do not strive to make gains at the cost of others, and also do not shut themselves up within a framework of personal interests. It is a community whose strength is measured by its weakest link, rather than by the strongest. In such a community no one is left abandoned to fate but each member can depend upon the others and empathy as well as fellow-feeling are the accepted norms.

4. Inclusive (open); that is, accepting as a member anyone who freely wishes to become one and who declares a willingness to accept responsibility for upholding the bonds of the community, and moreover not excluding anyone arbitrarily, that is, on the basis of criteria that have not been established by all its members. At the same time refusal of membership in the community ought not to result from factors over which the candidate for membership has no control, but only from those that are due to his or her own will and conscious decision.

5. Pluralistic; which signifies acceptance of an internal diversity of perspectives (and other traits), although such a community seeks the common ethical basis of various worldviews (the so-called minimal ethical consensus), which allows it to maintain a degree of internal harmony and also distinguishes it from other communities. A good community accepts its internal diversity as an opportunity for learning (or self-correction) as a result of the confrontation of varying points of view. For this reason such a variety of viewpoints is not only not suppressed in the name of achieving a stipulated unity, but is positively encouraged and innovative thinking is warmly received.

6. Tolerant: firstly, in the sense of bearing patiently manifestations of otherness, an otherness which might sometimes irritate or exasperate a majority of the other members of the community; secondly, in the sense of guaranteeing equal rights and equal treatment to all minorities that wish to remain within it, in this way honoring its axiological foundations; thirdly, in the sense of comporting itself among other (competing) communities with a good will which is testified to by mutual contact.

7. Well-informed; meaning that it permits the free creation and flow of information, and likewise equips its members with the necessary technologies and skills for sending and receiving information. The banning or suppressing of information is held by a good com-

munity to be a fundamental mistake, which must be amended for the sake of the community as such.

8. Participatory; meaning that it encourages everyone to take an active part in the life of the community as a whole, and that it is governed by the principle, "that which affects everybody, concerns everybody." A good community does all it can to persuade its members that they have a real influence over the course of their own lives; it rewards those who devote their private time to the affairs of the community, at the same time recognizing that civic participation cannot be an imposed duty, but is the initiative of individuals who are particularly concerned with the common welfare and whose chief reward is the general esteem.

9. Devoted to achieving unity through "civil accord" rather than through the creation of common enemies. By "civil accord" I mean the communal feeling of sharing fundamental values, as well as such features of mutual relation among members as understanding, friendliness, tolerance and trust.

10. Devoted to seeking the common good through open debate, which means that no one has the right to define a common good without submitting that view to the judgment of others, who may speak out freely upon the question.

Among the characteristics of a good community listed above, decidedly the most important is justice. Without this, a community falls apart and at the beginning of its dissolution is the appearance of a lack of trust. This lack of trust leads in the final instance to social demoralization, in which the individual comes to believe that personal interests take precedence over all others and that every means of advancing them can be countenanced. A clear symptom of this demoralization is that all members of the community come to view all others as potential rivals or enemies, towards whom any kind of treatment is justified that contributes to the individual's own personal gain. However, to disregard the other principles set forth above is also likely to have detrimental consequences on the community as a whole. For instance, replacing a constructivist model of community with an organic one can result in the suppression of individuality, diversity, and the ability to criticize freely, and ultimately in denial of the individual's right to make his or her own life choices, which is to say, in a kind of servitude. Absence of social solidarity will lead a community into a state of indifference towards injury and misfortune, which in the long run must threaten the existence of the community as such. Forsaking the principle of inclusivity may lead the community into various "fortress mentalities," of which the most dangerous is that which is expressed by the slogan, "whoever is not with us is against us." This is not to suggest that no community has the right to close its borders against others, but only to assert that

the borders must be permeable enough to admit those who wish to join the community and who have shown that they deserve to be allowed to do so. In turn, a community which rejects pluralism condemns itself to a uniformity of thought that will lead to internal fossilization, isolation, and stagnation. The suppression of internal criticism and leveling-out of diversity is a recipe for the elimination of a self-corrective processes, which means that in the long term the community may well lose the ability to correct its errors – errors which occur inevitably in every human group, as long as to err remains human.

To refuse to be tolerant exposes a community to the danger of ceaseless internal tension and conflict, thus threatening its unity, and also to the occurrence of external conflicts that can weaken its position among other communities. Likewise, a community that is not well informed is unable to take decisions about common goals which are based upon general considerations, rather than on the advice of those who happen to possess expert knowledge and who can therefore manipulate a community's conduct in furtherance of their own particular interests.

A community that does not encourage its members to take an active part in public affairs, including the decision-making process that leads to key policy choices, cannot be considered a participatory community and sooner or later will become a community in name only, having turned into a mere aggregate of persons concerned solely with their own individual destinies.

A community that requires a real or imagined enemy, in order to arise at all or to maintain a feeling of internal unity, poisons itself with negative emotions such as hatred and suspicion. Hostility towards outsiders will sooner or later leach inwards, causing hostility towards an imagined internal enemy, conceived as an agent of the external threat, which is a sure herald of internal disintegration.

Finally, to refuse open debate on the subject of common welfare leads to the discussion and identification of the latter becoming the monopoly of a single group at the core of the community, which usurps the right to decide for others what lies in their interest. In this way inevitably there arises a system of paternalism or regency exercised by one part of the community over the rest. This leads in turn to a feeling of alienation and potentially to rebellion on the part of those who have been deprived of a voice in framing the common good. The sense of exclusion from the process of taking decisions on communal affairs destroys the feeling of community, shattering it into a series of antagonistic factions which view each other with mistrust and indeed, with hostility. A good community therewith degenerates into a false community, in which the decisive force is not the force of argument but the literal force of arms.

Let us sum up. A good community is a community of people convinced of their equality who express an eagerness to participate in the

life of the group and help it to realize common aims. Such people should possess the means to communicate effectively among themselves and for these reasons have confidence that they can trust the other members of the community. Without this trust, the existence of any sort of real community whatsoever is impossible. Therefore, too, in the moment when a community begins to come apart, or when it finds itself in a serious crisis, nothing is more important than the restoration of such a feeling of trust, and this in turn is not possible without justice. We may return therefore to our starting-point and to the ancient Greek wisdom which held justice to be the supreme virtue. Generally speaking we may posit that there are four values of particular significance in the formation of communities, namely: justice, respect, sympathy and trust.

It is to be seen from the foregoing discussion that every community requires for its existence and maintenance certain sentiments and definite, unifying convictions and values. What has so far been implied is that we speak of a community only when these sentiments are positive and the values are constructive. This, of course, need not be the case. Although we would wish for communities to be built only on the basis of such values as respect, love, amity and friendly interest, we are aware nevertheless that they can and do arise also on the basis of hatred, resentment and the desire for revenge. So too it is in the case of solidarity. We would like solidarity to be expressed in working for the common good, as was seen, for example, in the Polish civic movement "Solidarity" in the years 1980-1981. It turns out, however, that there is likewise solidarity in doing ill, as with the solidarity of corporations banding together to protect their own material gain at the cost of the common good. I do not believe that only good communities may be called communities, or that solidarity can be deemed to exist only when it is solidarity in working for the good. Indeed, it may be that in some circumstances the lack of community and the lack of solidarity are better than their existence in certain forms. The value of a community cannot be judged independently out of context, and especially in the absence of an ethical framework. For even if community ties are valuable in their own right, it does not mean that we must deem *every* community tie a positive value. Sometimes it is better to be alone, than to find oneself in bad company; sometimes it is better to remain aloof from the pleasure of experiencing along with others some shared values, than to be seduced by a community that, while it may give us warmth and security, deprives us of our conscience. In every situation it is worth being cautious, worth remembering that the community is not always right, and that nothing can replace individual critical reflection. It is this latter thought that guarantees the independence of the individual in the face of feelings and emotions which, in giving us a sense of purpose or meaning, may also deprive us of not only our freedom but also of our reason.