

Interview with Jean-Luc Nancy

Jean-Luc Nancy was a continental philosopher who wrote widely about many topics, including friendship and community. He published *The Inoperative Community* in French in 1986 and the English translation followed in 1991 – this was a seminal work that influenced our thinking in many ways and certainly helped us develop the foundations of this book. He taught at the University of Strasbourg, the European Graduate School and numerous other universities. This interview was conducted in May 2021, a few months prior to his passing and is recounted here, shortened considerably but with only light editing to reflect the tone and tenor of our conversation, at times allusive and elusive, and filled with flashes of insight. If he were alive, we may well have tried to edit this with him for additional clarity but hope this retains his particular flow and style of thinking.

AJ/MH: How do you think about friendship, community, *being-with* today?

JLN: Today, communitarianism means closure on a supposed identity, but the idea of communism, the word *communism*, came before Marx. It was an idealistic idea of politics for people who were at the time thinking a new form of society. The word communism expressed a consciousness, that something had been lost of the *being-in-common*. Even the meaning of common was lost. This is the reason communism became a word.

The use of the word has already been made without any reflection on what comes next, who with, and the means by which it comes about. It

is clear that for the first people using the term after Marx, the starting point of the question of being-together starts before communism.

The point that was never examined in communism was precisely the content of the being *with*. In the whole history of Western philosophy, the *with* was never a question, was not answered. [...]. Aristotle says that to be together is not that simple, he speaks of the necessity of *filia* – like friendship, if you want. We could say from the time of Aristotle it was clear from all the Western tradition that society needs something, a certain force or energy to manage the *being with*.

And, why? Because I think we could say the whole Western ideal comes from the end of any kind of given community. There is, in the beginning of the Western idea, precisely the end of the way to make being-together possible. Maybe it's better to say this another way: to ask a question about togetherness.

Then the question is, what does it mean, *being together*? A mark, a sign, of the coming of the question in philosophy is in Heidegger. He brings up the question of being together in an ontological way as an aspect of *Dasein* – of existence. With Heidegger, instead of opening the way to think of another communism, Heidegger thinks in the way of an already-given community, the German people, and being-together becomes the struggle for the community of the people, *Volksgemeinschaft* later for the Nazis. Here are the origins of Nazism, fascism. Fascism has, in its own way, been an attempt to answer the question of community.

But at the same time and not by chance, in a reaction against socialism and communism, was individualism. It is nothing new – individualism was an invention of the Greeks, maybe more clearly emerging with Roman law. It is a technology to organize togetherness of something which was no longer people, but more than that. Under Roman law, everybody (though of course excluding women, slaves, foreigners), every 'citizen' was equal with the others. Equality is at the same time the designation of the individual as being something consistent by itself. From this time, the individual is for us, we could say, what remains of the end of the community and shall remain with a consistent link with others and the co-existence of the other.

But with Roman times, maybe at the same time with Christianity, the new link is a formal one of law. When it is not formal, when it is substantial, when it has content more than the formality of law, then it is in Christianity, where the individual is the son of God. We are all sons of God. Then it is something beyond the formal link of the law. But at the same time, it is not a visible link, and Christianity has answered this invisibility and sensibility, and the answer is Love. Love everybody and we are still without.

AJ/MH: You've started talking about the idea of friendship, referencing *filia*. Schmitt and Derrida claim that we need enemies to have politics. We are contending the opposite, that to think around that formulation is to reimagine a new kind of politics. We have begun to pull that thread a little bit, but friendship often has an insipid quality to it: we are looking for something more substantive. To what extent have you thought the political through friendship?

JLN: I don't know if I have a political conception of friendship. I understand what Derrida wanted to say and to think. I understand what it means precisely on the political level: there is no politics without friendship, but inside what? Inside a nation, state, people – all those walls are today in question inside, and outside there is a possibility of enmity.

But there are, for me, two questions: what is the unity of a people? A nation? It is not by chance today that we are so much in question, in trouble, in disorder about the identity of people. There is a necessity of having a new relationship of the people and how unified is the identity of a people. In Spain, you have Catalonia. Catalonia wants to be an independent country, because it has a language, a history, a culture – but what does that mean to make a country? We are putting into question the already given nations, which is absolutely normal as those nations are not eternal or ontologically constituted. This is a nationalistic way to think. I would say the modern idea of a nation is a very recent one, a very fragile one, absolutely normal to open questions. Today, economic and technical links are so strong that in a way, the idea of a national identity

makes no sense. The Schmittian way of friendship and enmity is maybe now in a very different configuration.

My second question is: what does friendship mean? What is friendship? For Aristotle, *philia* is a goodwill for the other, *philia* is a quality or a virtue to discover, to be taught to your children, and it has to be cultivated by the citizen. What is at the core of friendship? I would say now, maybe after Christianity, we are more in a state to understand what is friendship, because love is the only common idea to all kinds of love – romantic love or Christian love – when we say love, we talk about relationship to other as other, the other in its otherness, like Derrida says, absolute otherness. Friendship is, in a way, a relationship with the same. A friend is the same to me. This is precisely the principle of the possibility of enmity. The other is to me who is not the same. We have the word in Greek, for otherness: barbarian, is the other. Barbar is a Greek word to name people unable to speak Greek.

It is not today a question about the sameness because we are no longer in a world where it is possible. How to think of the sameness in a political, or in a communitarian way today, how to think of sameness? I am the same as each of you using the same computers to make the same electronic relationships. We are the same because we are confronting the virus. With the virus, it is much more difficult to understand what it means to be an individual and to be a community. But of course we are individuals and each of us have individual consciousness and unconsciousness.

AJ/MH: We have two questions related to your work on friendship and community: How do you approach the ecological question in this context, and second, how do you view relationships between humans and the more-than-human?

JLN: I think the ecological question has now become philosophical – it has become more than an ecological question. Today, the problem is that the word ecology is an excellent word – but this word at the same time names something which remains like a specialty. We have to change that.

I think that there is much more at stake with ecology, precisely the meaning of technology. Because technology now is clearly the way that human activity and human production becomes an automated system or machine that produces its own means and goals. And then, it is a question about what we are doing in this world if there are people who are inventing some device to organize all my life, my food, etc.

Ecology is not only the question of nature, which is very important: the destruction or the quasi-destruction that we made or are making. It is more than the destruction of what would be nature. The question of nature is one of self-destruction. For somebody like me, with my age and old Western tradition, I cannot understand whether it is going to self-destruct or lead to revolution. Revolution is maybe an empty word. Maybe it will happen, that it will transform everything. Between the Renaissance and 19th century, all modern science and technology was created. It created a unique event, becoming a self-producing system which in a way is able to produce a mankind being entirely taken in this self-producing system.

The future is unknown and not possible to know in a sense. Or it is no longer a future. In French, we make a distinction between *futur* and *avenir* – *the future* and *to come*. The future is not known. On the contrary – the future is much more of a techno-scientific term, the future is a present projection for the time to come. It is not to come, it is already there. If I say, in fifty years it will be possible to produce life in laboratories, then the possibility by itself means that there are already all the means to go to this goal. In a way, the goal is already there. Of course, we don't know exactly in what way, but the future of the future is not the type of *avenir*, that is nothing is to come – everything is there, we saw that the past was given. We could now say that the future, as well, is given.

We invent new ways to keep people alive, but we have absolutely no idea of what that means – a long life. Why is a long life better than a short life? Nobody can say that. A long life is considered as something good, okay, because life wants to live. But in all previous cultures, it was presented together, the idea that life was to die. Today, we don't want to acknowledge that there is death. We find it difficult to deal with death.

AJ/MH: We have a question around nostalgia. One of the questions we've been grappling with is a non-teleological view of history, and you've drawn this tension between teleological and non-teleological ways of thinking in the wake of Heidegger. Similarly, you've drawn a distinction between regimes of production and non-production. This idea of *to come* – in particular in relation to teleology – is particularly interesting to us. In the face of these waves of exclusions and displacements, there's always a nostalgic time, a time of before, when community was true and wholesome. Can we think of community in a time that does not presuppose that we have lost community?

JLN: You are right – all this thinking about community, of communism, was based on nostalgia of something. Maybe there is an allusion of Marx which is that capitalism is producing a new form of life which will transform itself through an impulse of revolution in the teleological final status of humanity. Archaeology and teleology are linked together. That means that we have again to think out of this *archae, teleologics*. Then it means we have to think in the present, not in the present of today, for everybody and every people, the present of a life which has a certain duration, but during this duration it is less a place for production than for reproduction.

Maybe reproduction could be a word for ecology. Reproduction is a way of life. The way of life is to reproduce itself. Reproduction implies death. If there would be no death, there would be no need of reproduction. We understand reproduction as sameness.

Everybody lives, dies, but is that all there is? Maybe we could say that it all makes sense by itself. Without a need to expect something better tomorrow – that is a teleology. But how to understand that as an absence of any need for a better tomorrow – maybe that is all the problem – because maybe the now is not so good.

We have to invent a new possibility of reproduction. Maybe most rich people and the masters of technology are just living towards the future. Each of us has a relationship to reproduction – to death. But maybe it is only a melancholic relationship. Impossible to go away – a society cannot be melancholic as a structure. Because it goes towards suicide. We

should not project the future change as reality, but as a dream. We have to dream. But what does it mean, to dream? We cannot only say that we are dreaming of a better tomorrow. We are dreaming, we are saying it's inconsistent. If we say a dream, then we come back to utopia. I agree it has a role, I would say a pedagogical role, maybe something more than a dream, that means not to make the dream come true, which is precisely the American way. From reality, the dream as dream, from the dream to something else.

