

Community

SEEKING SAFETY IN AN INSECURE WORLD



ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

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Insecure World

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Polity

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First published in 2001 by Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishing Ltd

Reprinted 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004 (twice), 2006, 2007, 2008

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Maiden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN 978-0-7456-2634-5
ISBN 978-0-7456-2635-2 (pbk)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library and has been applied for from the Library of Congress.

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 pt Plantin by SetSystems Ltd, Saffron Walden, Essex
Printed in United States by Odyssey Press Inc., Gonic, New Hampshire
This book is printed on acid-free paper.
For further information on Polity, visit our website <http://www.polity.co.uk>

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An Overture, or Welcome to Elusive Community

Words have meanings: some words, however, also have a 'feel'. The word 'community' is one of them. It feels good: whatever the word 'community' may mean, it is good 'to have a community', 'to be in a community'. If someone wandered off the right track, we would often explain his unwholesome conduct by saying that 'he has fallen into bad *company*.' If someone is miserable, suffers a lot and is consistently denied a dignified life, we promptly accuse *society* – the way it is organized, the way it works. Company or society can be bad; but not the *community*. Community, we feel, is always a good thing.

The meanings and feelings the words convey are not, of course, independent of each other. 'Community' feels good because of the meanings the word 'community' conveys – all of them promising pleasures, and more often than not the kinds of pleasures we would like to experience but seem to miss.

To start with, community is a 'warm' place, a cosy and comfortable place. It is like a roof under which we shelter in heavy rain, like a fireplace at which we warm our hands on a frosty day. Out there, in the street, all sorts of dangers lie in ambush; we have to be alert when we go out, watch whom we are talking to and who talks to us, be on the look-out every minute. In here, in the community, we can relax – we are safe, there are no dangers looming in dark corners (to be sure, hardly any 'corner' here is 'dark'). In a community,

we all understand each other well, we may trust what we hear, we are safe most of the time and hardly ever puzzled or taken aback. We are never strangers to each other. We may quarrel – but these are friendly quarrels, it is just that we are all trying to make our togetherness even better and more enjoyable than it has been so far and, while guided by the same wish to improve our life together, we may disagree how to do it best. But we never wish each other bad luck, and we may be sure that all the others around wish us good.

To go on: in a community we can count on each other's good will. If we stumble and fall, others will help us to stand on our feet again. No one will poke fun at us, no one will ridicule our clumsiness and rejoice in our misfortune. If we do take a wrong step, we can still confess, explain and apologize, repent if necessary; people will listen with sympathy and forgive us so that no one will hold a grudge forever. And there will always be someone to hold our hand at moments of sadness. When we fall on hard times and we are genuinely in need, people won't ask us for collateral before deciding to bail us out of trouble; they won't be asking us how and when will we repay, but what our needs are. And they will hardly ever say that helping us is not their duty and refuse to help us because there is no contract between us obliging them to do so, or because we failed to read the small print of the contract properly. Our duty, purely and simply, is to help each other, and so our right, purely and simply, is to expect that the help we need will be forthcoming.

And so it is easy to see why the word 'community' feels good. Who would not wish to live among friendly and well-wishing people whom one could trust and on whose words and deeds one could rely? For us in particular – who happen to live in ruthless times, times of competition and one-upmanship, when people around seem to keep their cards

close to their chests and few people seem to be in any hurry to help us, when in reply to our cries for help we hear admonitions to help ourselves, when only the banks eager to mortgage our possessions are smiling and wishing to say 'yes', and even they only in their commercials, not in their branch offices – the word 'community' sounds sweet. What that word evokes is everything we miss and what we lack to be secure, confident and trusting.

In short, 'community' stands for the kind of world which is not, regrettably, available to us – but which we would dearly wish to inhabit and which we hope to repossess. Raymond Williams, the thoughtful analyst of our shared condition, observed caustically that the remarkable thing about community is that 'it always has been'. We may add: or that it is always in the future. 'Community' is nowadays another name for paradise lost – but one to which we dearly hope to return, and so we feverishly seek the roads that may bring us there.

Paradise lost or a paradise still hoped to be found; one way or another, this is definitely not a paradise that we inhabit and not the paradise that we know from our own experience. Perhaps it is a paradise precisely for these reasons. Imagination, unlike the harsh realities of life, is an expanse of unbridled freedom. Imagination we can 'let loose', and we do, with impunity – since we have not much chance of putting what we have imagined to the test of life.

It is not just the 'harsh reality', the admittedly 'noncommunal' or even the explicitly community-hostile reality, that differs from that imagined community with a 'warm feel'. That difference, if anything, only spurs our imagination to run faster and makes the imagined community even more alluring. On this difference, the imagined (postulated, dreamed of) community feeds and thrives. What spells trouble for the cloudless image is another difference: that between the community of our

dreams and the 'really existing community': a collectivity which pretends to be community incarnate, the dream fulfilled, and (in the name of all the goodness such community is assumed to offer) demands unconditional loyalty and treats everything short of such loyalty as an act of unforgivable treason. The 'really existing community', were we to find ourselves in its grasp, would demand stern obedience in exchange for the services it renders or promises to render. Do you want security? Give up your freedom, or at least a good chunk of it. Do you want confidence? Do not trust anybody outside your community. Do you want mutual understanding? Don't speak to foreigners nor use foreign languages. Do you want this cosy home feeling? Fix alarms on your door and TV cameras on your drive. Do you want safety? Do not let the strangers in and yourself abstain from acting strangely and thinking odd thoughts. Do you want warmth? Do not come near the window, and never open one. The snag is that if you follow this advice and keep the windows sealed, the air inside would soon get stuffy and in the end oppressive.

There is a price to be paid for the privilege of 'being in a community' – and it is inoffensive or even invisible only as long as the community stays in the dream. The price is paid in the currency of freedom, variously called 'autonomy', 'right to self-assertion', 'right to be yourself'. Whatever you choose, you gain some and lose some. Missing community means missing security; gaining community, if it happens, would soon mean missing freedom. Security and freedom are two equally precious and coveted values which could be better or worse balanced, but hardly ever fully reconciled and without friction. At any rate, no foolproof recipe for such reconciliation has yet been invented. The problem is that the recipe from which the 'really existing communities' are made only renders the contradiction between security and freedom more obtrusive and harder to repair.

Given the unsavoury attributes with which freedom without security is burdened, as much as is security without freedom, it looks as if we will never stop dreaming of a community, but neither will we ever find in any selfproclaimed community the pleasures we savoured in our dreams. The argument between security and freedom, and so the argument between community and individuality, is unlikely ever to be resolved and so likely to go on for a long time to come; not finding the right solution and being frustrated by the one that has been tried will not prompt us to abandon the search – but to go on trying. Being human, we can neither fulfil the hope nor cease hoping.

There is little we can do to escape the dilemma – we can deny it only at our peril. One good thing we can do, however, is to take stock of the chances and the dangers which solutions proposed and tried have in store. Armed with such knowledge, we may at least avoid repeating past errors; we may also avoid hazarding ourselves too far along the roads which can be known in advance to be blind alleys. It is such a taking of stock – admittedly provisional and far from complete – that I’ve attempted in this book.

We cannot be human without both security and freedom; but we cannot have both at the same time and both in quantities which we find fully satisfactory. This is not a reason to stop trying (we would not stop anyway, even if it was). But it is a reminder that we should never believe that any of the successive interim solutions needs no further scrutiny or could not benefit from another correction. The better may be an enemy of the good, but most certainly the ‘perfect’ is a mortal enemy of both.

March 2000

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The Agony of Tantalus

According to Greek mythology, Tantalus – son of Zeus and Pluto, was on excellent terms with the gods who frequently invited him to wine and dine in their company at Olympic feasts. His life was, by ordinary folks' standards, trouble-free, joyful and all together happy – until, that is, he committed a crime which gods would not (could not?) forgive. As for the nature of that crime, various tellers of the story differ. Some say that he abused divine trust by betraying to his fellow-men the mysteries meant to be kept secret from the mortals. Others say that he was arrogant enough to suspect himself wiser than the gods and resolved to put the divine power of observation to the test. Other story-tellers still charged Tantalus with the theft of nectar and ambrosia which mortal creatures were not meant to taste. The acts imputed to Tantalus were, as we can see, different, but the reason for which they had been declared criminal was much the same in all three cases: Tantalus was guilty of acquiring/sharing knowledge which neither he nor other mortals like him should have. Or, more to the point: Tantalus would not stop at the partaking of divine bliss: in his conceit and arrogance he wished to make for himself what could be enjoyed only as a gift.

The punishment was swift; it was also as cruel as only offended and vengeful gods could make it. Given the nature of Tantalus' crime, it was an object-lesson. Tantalus was stood up to his neck in a stream – but when he lowered his head wishing to quench his thirst, the water flew away. Over

his head hung a luscious bunch of fruit – but whenever he stretched out a hand wishing to satiate his hunger, a sudden gust of wind blew the appetizing titbits away. (Hence, whenever things tend to vanish the moment we seem to have got them, at long last, within our reach – we complain of being ‘tantalized’ by their ‘tantalizing’ nearness.)

Myths do not tell stories to amuse. They are meant to teach, by endlessly reiterating their message: a kind of message which listeners may forget or neglect only at their peril. The message of the Tantalus myth is that you may stay happy, or at least stay happy blissfully and without worry, only as long as you keep your innocence: as long as you just enjoy your happiness while staying ignorant of the nature of the things that made you happy and not try to tinker with them, let alone to take them ‘into your own hands’. And that if you do dare to take matters into your own hands you will never resurrect the bliss which you could enjoy only in the state of innocence. Your goal will forever escape your grasp.

Other peoples than the Greeks must also have arrived at believing in the eternal truth and perpetual topicality of that message as they drew on their own experience; the Greeks were not alone in including that message among the stories they told to teach, and listened to learn. A very similar message flows from the story of Adam and Eve, whose penalty for eating from the Tree of Knowledge was expulsion from paradise; and the paradise was a paradise because they could live there trouble-free: they did not have to make the choices on which their happiness (or for that matter unhappiness) depended. The Jewish God could be on occasion no less cruel and unforgiving in his wrath than the residents of Olympus, and the penalty he designed to punish Adam’s and Eve’s offence was no less painful than the lot visited on Tantalus – it was only, so to speak, more sophisticated and called for more interpretative skills: ‘With

labour you shall win your food ... You shall gain your bread by the sweat of your brow.' While announcing this verdict, an angry God stationed 'to the east of the Garden of Eden' 'the cherubim and a sword whirling and flashing to guard the way to the tree of life' – to warn Adam and Eve and their offspring that no amount of labour or sweating would suffice to bring back the serene and carefree happiness of paradise ignorance; that happiness of the pristine sort had been irretrievably lost once innocence was lost.

Memory of that bliss would haunt Adam's and Eve's descendants and keep them hoping against hope that the road back could be discovered or blazed. This is, though, not to be – ever; on this point there was no disagreement between Athens and Jerusalem. Loss of innocence is a point of no return. One can be truly happy only as long as one does not know how truly happy one is. Having learned the meaning of happiness through its loss, children of Adam and Eve were bound to learn the hard way the bitter wisdom which to Tantalus was delivered on a platter. Their purpose would always elude them, however close (*tantalizingly* close) it might seem to be.

In the book which (intentionally or not) invited 'community' (*Gemeinschaft*) to return from the exile to which it had been banished during the modern crusade against *les pouvoirs intermédiaires* (accused of parochiality, narrowness of horizons and nurturing of superstition), Ferdinand Tönnies¹ suggested that what distinguished the bygone community from the rising (modern) society (*Gesellschaft*) in whose name the crusade was launched, was an *understanding shared by all its members*. Not a consensus, mind you: consensus is but an agreement reached by essentially differently minded people, a product of hard negotiation and compromise, of a lot of bickering, much contrariness, and occasional fisticuffs. The community- style, matter-of-factly (*zuhanden*, as Martin

Heidegger would say) understanding does not need to be sought, let alone laboriously *built* or *fought for*: that understanding 'is there', ready-made and ready to use – so that we understand each other 'without words' and never need to ask, apprehensively, 'what do you mean?' The kind of understanding on which community rests *precedes* all agreements and disagreements. Such understanding is not a finishing line, but the *starting point* of all togetherness. It is a 'reciprocal, binding sentiment' – 'the proper and real will of those bound together'; and it is thanks to such understanding, and such understanding only, that in community people 'remain essentially united in spite of all separating factors'.

Many years after Tönnies singled out 'common understanding' 'coming naturally' as the feature which sets the community apart from the world of bitter quarrels, cutthroat competition, horse-trading and log-rolling, Göran Rosenberg, the perceptive Swedish analyst, coined the concept of the 'warm circle' (in an essay in 2000 in *La Nouvelle Lettre Internationale*,) to grasp the same kind of naive immersion in human togetherness – once perhaps a common human condition, but nowadays available, increasingly, only in dreams. Human loyalties, offered and matter-of-factly expected inside the 'warm circle', 'are not derived from external social logic, or from any economic cost-benefit analysis'. This is exactly what makes that circle 'warm': it has no room for cold calculation and rota-learning of whatever society around, frostily and humourlessly, presents as 'standing to reason'. And this is exactly why frost-bitten people dream of that magic circle and would wish to cut that other, cold world to its size and measure. Inside the 'warm circle' they won't have to prove anything, and whatever they do they may expect sympathy and help.

Because of being so self-evident and 'natural', the shared understanding which makes community (or, for that matter,

the 'warm circle') escapes notice (we hardly ever notice the air we breathe, unless it is the foul and malodorous air of a stuffy room that we happen to inhale); it is, as Tönnies puts it, 'tacit' (or 'intuitive', in Rosenberg's terms). Of course, a contrived, an *achieved* understanding may also be tacit, or turn into a sort of contrived and internalized intuition. Protracted negotiation may result in an agreement which, if obeyed daily, may in its turn become a habit which no longer needs to be thought about, let alone monitored and policed. But unlike such sediments of past trials and tribulations, that sharing of understanding which is characteristic of a community is tacit 'according to its very nature':

This is because the contents of mutual understanding are inexpressible, interminable, and incomprehensible ... [R]eal concord cannot be artificially produced.

Since 'community' means shared understanding of the 'natural' and 'tacit' kind, it won't survive the moment in which understanding turns self-conscious, and so loud and vociferous; when, to use Heidegger's terminology again, understanding passes from the state of being 'zuhanden' to being 'vorhanden' and becomes an object for contemplation and scrutiny. Community can only be numb – or dead. Once it starts to praise its unique valour, wax lyrical about its pristine beauty and stick on nearby fences wordy manifestoes calling its members to appreciate its wonders and telling all the others to admire them or shut up – one can be sure that the community is no more (or not yet, as the case may be). 'Spoken of' community (more exactly: a community speaking of itself) is a contradiction in terms.

Not that real community, such as has not been 'artificially produced' or merely imagined, would have much chance of falling into that contradiction. Robert Redfield²