Supplement

Desperately seeking community? Towards new forms of coexistence

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From billboards selling ultra-fast optic fiber connections. From banners on websites peddling cookies. From supermarket loyalty cards. From neighborhood initiatives. From allotment gardens. From trade fair stands. From workshops, speakers, forums, social media. From libraries, smartphones, political party clubs, museums, bookshops. Wherever we are, wherever we turn, in recent years a voice has been growing louder and louder: one calling for "community".

"There is a longing for community." "Join the community." "I do everything to give back to the community." These are words we hear ever more often and ever louder. Ever more confusing. But what are the real questions here, and what are the possible answers?

Over recent years, I have found myself retracing the history of the term "community" several times, highlighting its uses and abuses (Niessen, 2023). The need arose during the pandemic, at a time when social isolation reached unprecedented heights and the demand for community was felt more strongly than ever before.

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For a long time, “community” was seen as the opposite of “society”. The former was synonymous with closure, familism, and conservatism, while the latter was associated with dynamism, openness, and innovation. “Community”, therefore, was a relatively isolated social group—conservative, often rural—in which traditional values and power relations guided relationships in the name of immutability. Society, on the other hand, was seen as a larger, cosmopolitan, metropolitan organism in which class organization led to a progressive transformation of power relations, tending towards change and equality. This dichotomy experienced ups and downs throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, changing its political, religious, and cultural character several times, depending on the context and historical events: from the Romanian Iron Guard communities to Adriano Olivetti’s factory communities; from para-religious groups such as Italy’s Comunione e Liberazione to the metropolitan communes of the student movement; from rehabilitation communities for drug addicts to those of new sects and religions.

Since the 1980s, a US-derived meaning of the term has spread throughout Italy. This happened first through films and TV series, where communities are groups of people who share common experiences of marginalization and empowerment (“the Puerto Rican community in New York” or “the gay community in San Francisco”, etc.), or who simply live in the same place (“I’m the sheriff of this town and I defend this community”). It became established later when, in the early days of the internet, the term “community” was chosen to refer to the group of users

registered on a particular forum. Shortly thereafter, an exponential number of marketing campaigns began to talk about consumer communities, often creating them from scratch along the way.

No longer alone

So, is this brief overview enough to explain the growing and pressing demand for community in recent years? Certainly not. Much has been said about how, over the closing decades of the twentieth century, members of Western societies came to feel increasingly alone. German sociologist Ulrich Beck highlighted how Western societies are increasingly focused on self-affirmation and individualization. The definition of identity is less and less a social issue and more and more a personal challenge, one which has moved from a given and natural dimension (as it was in pre-modern communities) to a planned one, the result of a task and an achievement (the famous "finding oneself") (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001).

At the same time, Zygmunt Bauman showed how the age we live in is characterized by a constant questioning of the points of reference necessary to give us a sense of "solidity in the world". Positions in the workplace or family and emotional roles; socially accepted models of convenience and decorum; the boundaries between health and illness; the skills deemed necessary to "get ahead in life"; the values of "being a good person". These and many other elements that structure social reality are changing with increasing frequency, with logic and timing that are often difficult to grasp if not in retrospect (Bauman, 2013).

This type of interpretation has been developed since

the early 1990s, long before social interactions became fragmented and mediatized through the adoption of smartphones and social networks. More than a technological push, individualization took place through a social and cultural push, linked to the end of mass identities (such as class), the end of Fordist production sites (such as factories), and the emergence of identities defined through consumption practices. It goes without saying, however, that new technologies have exacerbated and accelerated such changes.

Interpreted in the light of these transformations, the desire for community is above all a *desire not to be alone*. In other words, a *desire for closeness* to other beings (not necessarily human, but we will return to this later) who are able to fill the void left by the crumbling of clear-cut categories, practices, and structures oriented towards the collective self. It is a desire that has to do with the emotional, cognitive and psychological spheres—therefore tendentially pre-political—yet which finds major political support in both right-wing and left-wing identity politics (Bernstein, 2005), which, not surprisingly, also make abundant use of the term “community”.

This is a very risky practice, as highlighted by various forms of queer and intersectional criticism that have been levelled at it. While, on the one hand, the construction of platforms for the assertion of the demands of a specific identity (and therefore community) is a *conditio sine qua non* for the establishment of generative contexts of subjectivation with a view to achieving real democracy, on the other hand, it is essential for these platforms not to become fossilized in the defense of their own boundaries

and the rejection of those outside them (Butler, 2015; Crenshaw, 2013). This brings us back in some way to the impulse to detach from the community that fueled many of the political and cultural movements of the early-twentieth century: while it is true that community makes you feel close to some, it is also true that it makes you feel distant from many others. If you feel closeness to those inside, how do you feel towards those outside? How impassable are the boundaries, and what happens to those who cross them? How do you identify the scapegoat who is cast out of the community in the apotropaic ritual? And what is their fate in the midst of the desert?

Elsewhere, I have already highlighted some of the main risks of indiscriminate recourse to community rhetoric (Niessen, 2025), such as the "communal reification of policy making": the use of community labels by those who shape public policy (such as local administrations or providers of social or cultural funding) with the result of triggering instrumental alliances between heterodox subjects that cease as soon as the action of the external agent comes to a halt. Or the related phenomenon of "community overdesign": the excessive use of design tools to build in vitro relationships between individuals. These methods often resort to forms of community infantilization that seek to build a lowest common denominator between heterogeneous individuals through hyper-simplified languages and aesthetics: we see this happening in many public and relational art projects, as well as in many social animation contexts (Bishop). An indirect outcome of these practices may be the production of a general climate of the "surgical removal of conflict": the

papering over of elements of friction, imbalance and opposition between parties, in an attempt to restore an idyllic and homogeneous image of a place, a system of relationships, a social milieu. In the background, of course, there is always the prevailing risk inherent to this era of pervasive marketing: "social washing", or the use of community aesthetics and slogans for purely commercial reasons.

Highlighting these risks and critical issues does not mean discarding the questions behind the spread of community rhetoric. Rather, it means taking them extremely seriously and trying to draw the necessary conclusions. The desire for closeness and connection with others unlike us is one of the constituent elements of human nature, and not only. The perception of a constant crisis resulting from its unfulfillment is one of the most significant characteristics of the contemporary world. It reverberates constantly in culture and politics, in the production of symbolic forms, and in the management of power relations.

Towards new alliances

There are at least three main directions—in my opinion—in which to attempt an answer to these questions. The first has to do with the study and implementation of the multiplicity of collective subjects that fall under the definition of community yet which respond to often different logics, ones which may be at times more dynamic, transversal, generative, or inclusive. I have begun to collect possible taxonomies of subjects of this type, with the idea of constructing a new grammar of the collective: audiences,

productive audiences, scenes, extended families, social movements, local communities, affiliated communities, communities of practices, and so on. Learning to see and name these collective subjects means giving them strength, mobilizing new forms of action and identity (Niessen, 2023).

The second concerns alliances between inhabitants of areas with different levels of urban intensity. The trend towards urbanization—the abandonment of rural and mountain areas in favor of cities and metropolises—is increasingly marked, and a growing percentage of people now live in urbanized areas. Economic, social, cultural, and planning resources are increasingly concentrated in urban areas, making so-called inland areas increasingly marginalized and impoverished. I believe there is a profound need to develop new forms of alliances between inhabitants, administrations, and organizations in metropolitan, semi-peripheral and internal areas, with the aim of finding new shared solutions to address depopulation issues on the one hand, and growing uninhabitability caused by global warming on the other. I call this strategy "socio-spatial intersectionality", to indicate the need to hybridize these new alliances with those emerging from the struggles against the marginalization caused by inequalities (be they somatic, of dis/ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, etc.) (Niessen, 2024).

Over the following pages, I wish to examine the demand for alliances between ourselves and others, starting with climate change and the increasingly frequent ecological crises. Despite the popularity of various forms of climate denial, the inevitability of global warming is now

beginning to be accepted even by people other than experts and the more educated public. Heatwaves, floods, flashfloods, fires: the succession of extreme weather events is right there for all to see. Today, it is no longer just remote and sparsely populated places that are under threat, but also metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles and Valencia, as demonstrated by the fires of 2025 and the floods of 2024, respectively. A 2021 study by the World Meteorological Organization highlighted that extreme weather events have increased fivefold over the last fifty years (World Meteorological Organization, 2021). Cities face longer and hotter summers every year, with repeated heatwaves and a steadily increasing average number of days of extreme heat.

Their habitability is becoming increasingly complex, and in the future, this is set to alter other forms of inequality: the poorest and most marginalized are destined to live in increasingly hot, less hospitable, and less healthy homes.

Countering these growing inequalities involves three trajectories. First, we need to combat climate denial on all fronts, reducing the political and cultural space for positions that minimize or relativize the anthropogenic causes of the ongoing catastrophe. Secondly, we need to develop new forms of political mobilization capable of acting on a global scale so as to put pressure on national governments not to give in to the demands of the denialist lobbies. Thirdly, it is crucial to develop new forms of environmental imagination capable of building generative alliances with more-than-human entities.

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New more-than-human alliances

In recent years, theoretical reflection in various disciplines has laid the foundations for a fundamental re-examination of many seemingly unshakeable beliefs about the relationship between *us* and *others*. Starting with anthropology and sociology, in the 1980s Bruno Latour empirically demonstrated how every type of actor (human, animal, technological, vegetal, etc.) is connected to others through networks of influence, and that every actor has some form of agency, understood as the capacity or possibility to act on others. This reflection and research practice has challenged the separation between the natural and social domains: what we conceive as natural is the result of a cultural, political and epistemological operation carried out by humans, whose boundaries are constantly shifting for a variety of reasons. This separation has been explored by many authors, often at the crossroads between different disciplines such as biology and philosophy, or physics and psychoanalysis.

The critique of the separation between nature and culture has been pursued in a particularly convincing manner by anthropologist Philippe Descola's study of non-Western ontologies: by comparing the cosmogonies and conceptions of reality of indigenous populations living in various parts of the world, Descola paints a broad picture of the possible ways in which certain non-human actors are included, excluded or transported into networks of relationships, alliances and kinships with humans, and vice versa. Philosopher and biologist Donna Haraway explores many key themes related to the relationship between humans and non-humans, from the cyborg body as a post-

natural integration of cultural and natural elements, to the relativization of metaphors in primatology based on the ideologies of researchers. Above all, Haraway questions the construction of “companionship”: extended family relationships that transcend not only gender distinctions but also those of species (Haraway, 2003).

In the field of design and contemporary art, there are now countless examples of this type of thinking, to the point that in 2019, critic Nicolas Bourriaud—best known for popularizing the label “relational art”, which refers to practices that focus on relationships and social contexts rather than on works—felt the need to coin the term “co-activity” to describe artistic practices that are in some way co-produced by human and non-human actors (Bourriaud, 2019).

Of course, reading this (ridiculously) concise overview, one might think these are a series of entirely abstract and speculative issues. In short, they are good for those who spend far too much time with their noses stuck in books and who do not have to deal with the real world. And indeed, these positions are often attacked with paradoxical arguments aimed at dismissing them as romantic, naïve, or simply unworkable: “so now we want dogs to vote too, do we?”; “environmentalism is ultimately a trivial issue that has nothing to do with people’s real needs”; and so on. Yet things are very different. Of course, the changes in perspective on the nature of the world that many of these (highly erudite and articulate) dissertations entail are not the subject of everyday conversation. But there are ever more solutions and practices that refer—implicitly or explicitly—to a revolution in the conception of

relations between humans and non-humans.

Personhood

A striking example is the attribution of legal personality to non-human actors *(personhood).* This approach developed in environmental law to recognize and attempt to regulate the relationship between indigenous peoples and non-human natural entities, such as rivers (Kahui et al., 2024). In this field, Ecuador has been a pioneer in recognizing the rights of nature at the constitutional level, since 2008. In particular, Article 71 of its Constitution states that nature (*Pacha Mama*, i.e. Mother Earth) has the right to exist and to be protected as an entity. Under this article, every citizen and community in the country may demand that public authorities respect this right (Nocera & Arias, 2023).

More and more states are following this path. In 2017, New Zealand granted legal personality to the Whanganui River, following a battle fought by the Maori people for over 160 years (Rodgers, 2017). In Peru, in 2024, the Marañón River and its tributaries were granted legal personality following protests by a group of Kukama women against pollution and a long battle in court.

This approach is extending far beyond the protection of waterways. The joint statement by several Polynesian leaders on Pacific whales, made public in early April 2024, attracted considerable attention. The document, entitled *He whakaputanga moana* (Declaration for the Ocean), calls for the recognition of legal personality for whales and outlines a global strategy for their protection. The primary objective is to protect the right of the *Tohorā* (southern

right whales) to migrate freely in order to preserve and increase their declining populations, threatened by the impact of human activities. The treaty proposes the creation of marine protected areas, the adoption of scientific evidence to improve conservation initiatives and the establishment of a specific fund for the protection of these cetaceans (Hikuroa et al., 2025).

It is important to highlight that these practices are rooted in a perspective that draws on indigenous knowledge and differs radically from the European legal approach. As highlighted by the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, the European system focuses primarily on the protection of human rights: if these are violated as a result of human activities that cause pollution and environmental damage—accelerating the climate crisis and the depletion of natural resources—European courts have the power to intervene to protect the health of citizens (ECHR ruling of April 9, 2024).

Coexistence between humans, wolves and eco-districts

Despite this distance, concrete initiatives based on similar theoretical and cultural assumptions are also multiplying in Europe. An interesting example is the European LIFE WolfAlps EU project, developed between 2019 and 2024. The wolf population, made extinct in the Alps at the beginning of the twentieth century, began a natural recolonization in the 1990s. Today, wolves are present in all Alpine countries and many low-altitude areas, including some hills and flatlands. The coexistence of humans and wolves is an important testing ground for trying to develop

forms of shared subjects beyond the human, due to a number of specific critical issues. Firstly, because wolves have long been seen as negative, even though they're not really dangerous to humans. Secondly, because wolves are predators at the top of the food chain, and living alongside livestock and sheep farming can be tricky. Furthermore, wolf populations are highly mobile and adaptable, and can inhabit new areas relatively quickly.

LIFE WolfAlps EU has built unprecedented strategies and alliances to improve coexistence between wolves and the communities living and working in the Alps—between Italy, France, Austria, and Slovenia—and in the Ligurian-Piedmont corridor. It has developed an international network of twenty partners, 119 supporters and six co-founders with the aim of overcoming the "man versus wolf" dichotomy. On the one hand, protection activities have been launched, such as combating hybridization between dogs and wolves, poisoning, and poaching. On the other hand, cross-cutting actions have been developed between many different types of stakeholders to ensure that the issue does not remain confined to experts: scientists, and technicians, but also farmers, hunters, administrators, politicians, journalists, hikers, tour operators, and educators. The project also focused on possible forms of coexistence: what this means in theory and in practice; what the responsibilities and trajectories of those coexisting are; and what scope there is for action in terms of the economy, communication and research.

A different but in some ways similar model is that of the eco-district. This is a new form of institution that has emerged at regional level in Italy: a geo-ecological, socio-

economic and cultural territorial system, defined through a participatory process at regional level, characterized by one or more homogeneous environmental features, such as the presence of water basins, wooded areas, areas with intense land use, etc. The eco-district may incorporate various forms of alliance between human and non-human actors, governed by European legal norms with a view to promoting the common good. Examples include river, lake or landscape contracts: forms of voluntary regulation between various public and private actors that aim to protect and manage water resources correctly and sustainably, preventing or at least reducing pollution. These are solutions that aim to protect ecosystems with a view to enhancing river areas—particularly with regard to protection from hydrogeological risks—without sacrificing all local development (Tucci & Baiani, 2020).

And so?

Nothing we have considered here is without possible criticism or flaws. In fact, everything probably raises more ethical, legal, and economic questions than it answers. Does it make sense to attribute agency to features of the landscape? And what are the profound implications of attributing equal rights to humans and wolves, or to humans and whales? To what extent can these practices be implemented in local contexts, when they inevitably clash with economic interests? And how should we consider non-human technological actors—such as software, algorithms, databases, and automata—which play an increasingly central and revolutionary role in our lives?

Despite the giddiness we may feel when faced with

such questions—and despite the scorn, annoyance, or hatred they arouse across large swathes of public opinion—it is clear that in order to tackle the great complex issues of our times, we need to find answers. We need to try to understand what it means to live together, beyond the limits of communities, and in new forms of coexistence.

Biographical Notes

Bertram Niessen is the President and Scientific Director of cheFare, which he cofounded in 2012. He was among the founders of the cheFare prize (2012–2014), and in 2014 he oversaw its transformation into an agency for cultural change. Today, he leads the development of its various branches: cultural project design, curating live events, online and offline collaborative processes, grassroots cultural organization empowerment, and advisory for public institutions. Since 2003, he has taught in undergraduate and graduate programs, master's courses, and doctoral schools at universities and academies such as: the PhD School in Social Sciences and the Department of Sociology and Social Research at the University of Milano-Bicocca; the Department of Information Sciences at the University of Milan; the SCODEM master's program at the University of Trento; the MEC (Master in Cultural Events) and ALMED (Graduate School of Media, Communications, and Performing Arts) programs at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan; the Sole 24Ore Business School; NABA (New Academy of Fine Arts) in Milan; and the RCS Academy Master's in Cultural and Artistic Heritage Management. He was a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Milan within the EU projects EDUFASHION and Openwear. He holds a PhD in Urban European Studies from the University of Milano-Bicocca. In 2001, he was a founding member of otolab, an experimental electronic art collective with which he created hundreds of performances, concerts, and installations for leading international digital culture festivals.

He regularly collaborates with print, digital, and radio outlets. Over the years, he has contributed to La Domenica – Il Sole 24 Ore, IL, Nòva, Il Giorno, Artribune, Doppiozero, Digicult, Rai Radio Live, and RSI Radiotelevisione svizzera. His editorial work includes dozens of publications, including edited volumes, book chapters, articles in academic journals, and prefaces. His latest book is *Abitare il Vortice. Come le città hanno perduto il senso e come fare per ritrovarlo (Living the Vortex. How Cities Lost Meaning and How to Regain It*, UTET, 2023).

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