Community as Communication: Jean-Luc Nancy and ‘Being-in-Common’

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This article seeks to propose and defend the necessity of political community as a prerequisite for an effective democratic polity. It defends a republican model of political community, involving ideas of active citizenship and interaction across the particular identity groups which proliferate in contemporary liberal-democratic societies. It is argued that ideas of community as communication, derived from the work of the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, and his distinction between ‘being-in-common’ and ‘common being’, can be applied in a more political sense than in his original usage to justify a revised notion of republican solidarity. This more open form of community is used as the basis for expounding a strong concept of civic identity, which is defended against three rival conceptions. The article takes issue with some liberal theorists who assert that political community is neither desirable nor possible under contemporary conditions. It offers reasons to be sceptical of both a ‘civic nationalist’ perspective as well as of ‘post-nationalist’ arguments. The significance of the issue of community is illustrated by examples drawn from the recent riots in France and some analyses of the significance of those events.

This article seeks to argue for the desirability and necessity of political community for the healthy working of democracy. It takes as its starting point the statement by the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy that ‘the gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world ... is the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 1). There can be little doubt that the establishment of political community is more problematic in contemporary liberal-democratic societies of deep diversity. This term is taken to mean societies where diverse ethnic, cultural and religious identities command citizens’ allegiance. Under such conditions the idea of a nation state linked by common historical memories and a shared culture no longer affords a realistic perspective for achieving an inclusive and overarching political identity. Recent riots in France, the home of the assimilationist republic, offer a vivid example of the consequences of a weakening of democratic solidarity and political community, and the importance of overcoming separation and marginalisation of groups of citizens, or would-be citizens (see Wieviorka et al., 1999, for a general analysis, still relevant to current events). These events and some current analyses will be referred to as illustrating problems of community in contemporary liberal-democratic societies. The argument developed here starts by expounding Nancy’s ideas on community, with the aim of applying his often rather abstract and cryptic concepts to develop a conceptualisation of political community rather different from those currently on offer in the literature. Following Nancy, the emphasis is on community as communication, a task or process always incomplete, as
indicated by his statement that ‘It is not a matter of making, producing, or instituting a community; nor is it a matter of venerating or fearing within it a sacred power – it is a matter of incompleting its sharing’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 35). The analysis given below then develops and departs from Nancy’s perspective by arguing that his ideas of community as a process of ongoing and never fully achieved communication can be reconciled with a republican perspective of active citizenship and a state which fosters such a role for its citizens. This in turn rests on the hypothesis that political community in this communicative form is a necessary condition for the effective working of a democratic society. To defend this hypothesis involves criticising a range of opposing perspectives in recent debates on community and democracy.

The kind of political community which it is sought to defend here is some version of a republican concept, based on developing interaction between citizens and mutual understanding across cultural and ethnic divisions. Such an idea of positive political community, stronger than the mere fact of living under common political institutions (Mason, 2000), does not involve the denial of difference or diversity, but seeks to build up links of mutual respect and shared understanding between citizens with their distinct particular affiliations. The aim is not assimilation to some common culture or shared conception of the good, but the achievement of a more activist stance of citizenship, encouraged though not coercively enforced by a republican state. This would promote a sense of solidarity and reciprocity lacking in contemporary liberal-democratic societies. Such a strong or ‘thick’ form of political community is necessary, so it is argued here, for contemporary democracies to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens.

What form would this political community take? A recent critique of ‘cultural nationalism’ argues that ‘integration in liberal democracies is not contingent upon cultural nationalist assimilation policies’, and rightly insists on the need ‘for a normative theory of liberal democracy in multinational and post-national contexts’ (Abizadeh, 2002, p. 508). However its author does not proceed beyond the task of criticising those whom he labels as ‘cultural nationalists’ to suggest how to satisfy the need for such a normative theory of integration in liberal democracy within multinational and post-national contexts. This present article seeks to do just that by using Nancy’s ideas to view republican citizenship and political community in new and less rigid ways, with reference to current events in order to suggest the practical need and relevance of recasting community in this ‘communicative’ perspective. As already intimated, this type of political community goes beyond what one recent analysis (Mason, 2000) envisages as an inclusive political community based purely on a shared sense of ‘belonging to a polity’. There has to be, so it is argued here, what Andrew Mason calls a form of ‘belonging together’, not in the sense of sharing a common culture, but in a political meaning of common citizenship. This would involve respect for and recognition of difference, equality of rights of participation, but beyond that the
insistence on some active and practical manifestation of those values of common citizenship.

The core idea then is that a democratic society needs some affirmation of common values which go beyond a mere recognition of living under the same political institutions, because this latter recognition is too passive, and can cover resigned acceptance as well as enthusiastic endorsement. The model of political community to be defended here avoids two dangers, on the one hand that of too weak an idea of political community, exemplified in different ways by two theorists whose ideas are criticised below. The first of these is Chandran Kukathas with his model of the liberal ‘archipelago’ in which there is no interaction between the different ‘islands’; the second is Mason with his idea of acceptance of shared political institutions (Kukathas, 2003; Mason, 2000). This latter does not allow room for any common activity that affirms the value of joint deliberation and decision-taking. Political community as envisaged in the present article also avoids the danger of too strong a concept of political community (what Nancy calls ‘common being’ or ‘fusion’) in which citizens would have to agree on a concept of the good life, since such value agreement is impossible to achieve in contemporary society. What they would have to agree on for democracy to work is a degree of political involvement which necessitates some practical activity. This practice would at a minimum be related to listening to perspectives opposed to one’s own, and seeking to understand them. It would also involve some public articulation of democratic values, whether by a symbolic affirmation of those values, or by some activity seen as validating them, for example by some voluntary service or publicly recognised acts of assistance and solidarity with respect to other citizens. It will be clear that there is a tension between these more classically republican ideals and Nancy’s existential ideas of community always in the making, to be expounded below. It will be argued here that the latter can point the way to a looser concept of republican solidarity which is much more accommodating of difference.

The Concept of Community: ‘Being-in-Common’ versus ‘Common Being’

The concept of community is notoriously fluid and capable of so many definitions as to be at risk of meaning anything, or nothing. At one extreme it can be used to mean an all-embracing totalistic community of organic unity, which suffocates or annihilates difference. At the other extreme community can refer to much looser and evanescent forms of association, such as those ‘aesthetic communities’ noted by Zygmunt Bauman for their ‘maximal impact and instant obsolescence’, depending on superficial and transient bonds between individuals who see such communities as a ‘light cloak’ rather than a ‘steel casing’ (Bauman, 2001, p. 69, p. 65).

Different from those two forms of community, the concept of community which normatively underpins the present analysis is derived from Nancy’s suggestive
discussion. He argues that community is ‘existence in as much as it is in common, but without letting itself be absorbed into a common substance. Being in common has nothing to do with communion, with fusion into a body’ (Nancy, 1991, p. xxxviii). Two crucial points can be taken from Nancy’s philosophical approach. The first is that as he puts it, ‘being-in-common is not a common being’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 29) and that ‘there is no communion of singularities in a totality superior to them and immanent to their common being’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 28). If community thus is not ‘a project of fusion’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 15), we can make sense of Nancy’s seemingly paradoxical assertion that ‘in a certain sense community acknowledges and inscribes – this is its peculiar gesture – the impossibility of community’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 15). The political implications of this would seem to be that a political community does not seek to fuse particular or individual identities into one singular being, but acknowledges plurality and difference, and in that way recognises the impossibility of a ‘common being’, while striving for a ‘being-in-common’.

The second point which emerges from Nancy’s analysis is that this being-in-common emerges from a process of ‘sharing and in this comppearance (com-partion) of finitude’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 29). This can be interpreted as the reciprocal interaction between individuals of different identities, who appear before each other or are involved in a process of mutual exposure. If Nancy is right to say that ‘the being of community is the exposure of singularities’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 30), this implies that a political system has to aim at interaction between groups and individuals. The essence of community is thus not fusion but this reciprocal exposure of singularities, so that each citizen has to ‘expose’ their particular identities to others, through some form of communication and interaction. It would be through such communicative interaction that a sense of sharing a common bond of citizenship would develop, stronger than merely being subject to the same political institutions. It is such a more active sense of community, distinguished from a project of ‘fusion’, that it is sought here to explain and justify, with some indications of how it might be achieved in the conditions of modern mass democratic and highly pluralist societies. Political community is thus something always sought after, rather than fully achieved, and it is seen here as a form of a ‘communication community’, where communities ‘are products of “practices” rather than “structures” ’ and ‘created rather than reproduced’ (Delanty, 2003, p. 130).

To do further justice to Nancy’s ideas, it is necessary to explain that his view of community emphasises it as an existential and ongoing project. It is not a question of restoring something that has been lost, or that was present in some bygone golden age: ‘Community has not taken place ... So that community, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is what happens to us – question, waiting, event, imperative – in the wake of society’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 11, emphasis in original). It is erroneous, on this analysis, to wish to hark back to some model of community which supposedly existed at some earlier time. Nancy invokes community as a
kind of resistance, which he calls a ‘resistance to immanence’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 35). Such undesirable ‘immanence’ would seem to equate to a threatening ‘common being’ or ‘fusion’. This is antithetical to the idea of community as a mutual exposure of singularities on which Nancy focuses: ‘Community therefore occupies a singular place: it assumes the impossibility of its own immanence, the impossibility of a communitarian being in the form of a subject’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 15). These ideas imply a hostility to any idea of a fixed political community, whether republican or any other, sealing citizens together in a notion of republican or democratic solidarity. This would represent a dangerous kind of political appropriation or even repression of the ongoing communication that constitutes community. For Nancy the nature of the political involves ‘a community consciously undergoing the experience of its sharing’. As he puts it: ‘If the political is not dissolved in the sociotechnical element of forces and needs (in which, in effect, it seems to be dissolving under our eyes), it must inscribe the sharing of community’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 40). One commentator on Nancy’s ideas suggests an antithesis between ‘closed immanence’ and ‘open immanence’. The latter involves the ongoing communication between singular individuals, or the mutual ‘compearing’ of individuals to each other (Hutchens, 2005, p. 61).

These ideas of community as constituted by a fluid, never completed, process of communication lead to a sceptical attitude towards any notions of republican solidarity. These values would appear to be, on Nancy’s analysis, in danger of congealing the ‘being-in-common’ into a ‘common being’ of ‘absolute immanence’. However, the argument to be developed here suggests that republican citizenship can be envisaged in more open forms, precisely as an ongoing process of active communication and mutual ‘compearance’. Nancy’s concepts can thus open the way to a new conceptualisation of republican solidarity which is not viewed in rigid terms, as some fixed essence to which all citizens have to conform, but which is seen as an ongoing and never finalised process of interaction between holders of different identities, or ‘finitudes’, in Nancy’s philosophical language. This alternative reading involves using Nancy’s ideas of ‘a mutual interpellation of singularities’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 29) to render more flexible the solidarity of the republican tradition. This would involve an updating or ‘aggiornamento of republican institutions’ (Wieviorka et al., 1999, p. 335). Such a revised republicanism precludes hostility to difference on the one hand while on the other steering away from ‘communitarianism’ or forms of particular identity politics which know no limits and impose one stifling identity on those held to be within its ambit. The affirmation of cultural identity is not incompatible with attachment to universal values (Wieviorka et al., 1999, p. 231).

The legitimacy of such a reading and application of Nancy’s ideas to the sphere of political community needs some further justification, in particular given his insistence that community is ‘inoperative’ and cannot be seen as a fixed project. He argues that ‘A community is not a project of fusion, or in some general way a productive or operative project – nor is it a project at all’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 15). His
statement that ‘It is not a matter of making, producing, or instituting a com-
munity’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 35) would seem to show a radical hostility to any kind of
republican or any other kind of political community, however much revised and
loosened up to take more account of difference. Indeed the ideas of his essay The
Inoperative Community appear to undermine directly forms of republican citizen-
ship, as when he denies any validity to the idea that ‘the common being, as such,
be objectifiable and producible (in sites, persons, buildings, discourses, institutions,
symbols: in short in subjects)’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 31). That his target includes a
discourse of civic republicanism with its integrative symbols is clear from his
statement that ‘Products derived from operations of this kind ... have no more
communitarian existence than the plaster busts of Marianne’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 31).
However, so it is argued here, his ideas can be used as a challenge to existing ideas
of republican citizenship to modify hitherto dominant concepts of political
community, and to suggest in a practical way transformations of contemporary
liberal democracy, even though that is not the way in which Nancy himself might
wish to apply his ideas. The emphasis in what follows is on his ideas of the political
as ‘a community consciously undergoing the experience of its sharing’ (Nancy,
1991, p. 40). These ideas can be ‘translated’ into more concrete proposals and
perspectives dealing with the current crisis of political community, in France as
elsewhere, which could be described in Nancy’s language as ‘the conflagration of
community’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 1). The question is whether the ideas expounded
above can be applied practically to issues of actual politics, and if so the ways in
which this could be done. It is argued here that Nancy’s idea that ‘finitude
compears, that is to say it is exposed: such is the essence of community’ (Nancy,
1991, p. 29) helps to analyse the contemporary crisis and may indicate a direction
of institutional reform for liberal-democratic systems.

Crisis of Republican Community

One significant model of political community is that encapsulated by the repub-
lican tradition. Current events in France illustrate challenges to that model of
community, seen as indifferent, even hostile, to difference and unsympathetic to
affirmations of identity and pluralism. Urban discontent well before the ‘revolt of
the suburbs’ of November 2005 shows the difficulty of achieving community
under conditions of widespread unemployment, the concentration of families
with severe social problems in particular housing estates and geographical areas
and the weakening of institutions which could offer political mediation
(Mucchielli, 2001, p. 94). The republican tradition in its more formalistic mani-
festations could be seen as an example of a ‘common being’, rather than a
‘being-in-common’, a sort of political appropriation into a transcendent subject,
‘la République pure et dure’, in the words of one recent analysis of violence in
France (Wieviorka et al., 1999, p. 337). Such a monolithic political sovereign
would call forth a resistance from active and diverse communities, reluctant to be
swallowed up in republican institutions which neither live up to their promises of
political and social equality nor offer any recognition of particular identities. This is a plausible reading of recent events in France, stressing ‘the broken promises of republican integration’ (Wieviorka et al., 1999, p. 101).

One recent analysis of the urban riots in France in November 2005 suggests that those riots stemmed from a double crisis. The first was economic and social, arising from high levels of unemployment, with racial discrimination making it especially difficult for those of immigrant origin to find work. The second was a crisis of symbolic and political significance, involving ‘access to citizenship’ which is particularly problematic ‘for young men of immigrant background who found themselves in a general sense not recognised, discriminated against and indeed rejected within French society, and not represented by established political agencies’ (Mucchielli and Le Goaziou, 2006, p. 29). The practices of republican citizenship thus fail a significant section of those who should be included within their ambit. Ideas of recognition, of what Nancy calls ‘mutual compearance’ and the development of a new discourse of politics would be ways in which the broken promises of the republican tradition could begin to be remedied. Such a new discourse would have to depart from prevailing political language which sees rioters as a security problem to be dealt with by the traditional repressive methods of the state, a ‘policing culture of maintaining order (and of political intelligence) in the service of a contested state, a culture deeply engrained in French history’ (Mucchielli and Le Goaziou, 2006, p. 113). The point is of wider application beyond the French context. It points the way to an alternative concept of political community that sees it more in terms of a continuing process, rather than of some fixed goal or unchanging values which recalcitrant elements must accept. In the French case, it would mean recognising that those rioting ‘basically never had a place in French public space’ (Mucchielli and Le Goaziou, 2006, p. 91). Thinking of political community in these new ways would suggest a way of remedying this problem. What this might imply in institutional terms is suggested below, after alternative models of community have been analysed. Ideas of ‘mutual compearance’ can be used to develop a political programme that avoids the stifling of ‘common being’, and seeks to realise in a realistic way an alternative both to multicultural fragmentation and to modus vivendi liberalism, examined below.

Is Community Necessary at All? Liberal Critiques of Community

Such a political programme of open or communicative community comes up against the objection from some contemporary liberals that political community in any but a very weak sense is unnecessary for a democratic society, and harmful to the goals of liberalism. This view has recently been forcefully stated by Kukathas, and his argument is taken as illustrative of one variety of liberalism which is sceptical of the value of political community. Kukathas writes that ‘the purpose that ought to be rejected is the aspiration to achieve social unity through the elaboration of ideas that all can embrace, and which might bring our fractious
ways of thinking into harmony’ (Kukathas, 2003, p. 259). He argues that ‘the task of finding the basis of social unity in a political order is not so urgent because there is no deep basis for the bonds of association to be found’, and he draws the conclusion that ‘a political community need be no more than an association of people who recognise the terms of coexistence’ (Kukathas, 2003, p. 210).

Such a view can be labelled one of modus vivendi liberalism, as presented by John Gray, who defines it in the following way: ‘Modus vivendi is liberal toleration adapted to the historical fact of pluralism’ (Gray, 2000, p. 6). This view can be criticised with the following arguments. Kukathas seems to believe that the danger of an overarching political community lies in part in the probability that such an affiliation would reduce other bonds which are more significant for individuals: ‘giving political community greater importance must mean weakening other communal ties’ (Kukathas, 2003, p. 177). There seems however no necessity why this should be so, unless one operates with a very ‘zero-sum’ view of community which assumes that greater commitment to political community automatically decreases the interest in or loyalty to other associations. But there is no reason for this to be the case, unless one makes the dubious assumption that civic loyalty is so all consuming and takes up so much time that it would leave no place for particular identities. This seems to be a caricature of the idea of civic loyalty.

There are two further, more positive, arguments against attempts to devalue the idea of political community. The first is that reducing the aspiration to social unity to the politics of indifference, which is how Kukathas describes liberalism (Kukathas, 2003, p. 249), risks dividing society into different groups that have an exceedingly thin and distant relationship with each other. This creates a society characterised by ‘encapsulation’, in which citizens are wrapped up in particular identities and groups which command their loyalty. Such a society is very weak in sentiments of reciprocity and mutual interaction across the boundaries of the particular institutions of what Kukathas calls ‘the liberal archipelago’. If society can be viewed as ‘an archipelago of different communities operating in a sea of mutual toleration’ (Kukathas, 2003, p. 8), then this mutual toleration surely will be advanced when its citizens share a sense of being part of some common unit which is greater than those particular associations that express their personal inclinations and interests. This line of argument emphasises what John Dryzek calls the centrality of engagement across discourses in the public sphere, in other words the need to forge links across ‘the mutually contradictory assertions of identity that define a divided society’ (Dryzek, 2005, p. 219).

Furthermore, viewing the state ‘as no more than a transitory political settlement whose virtue is that it secures civility’ (Kukathas, 2003, p. 15 ) neglects the capacity of collective action, organised by the state on a nationwide basis, to pool resources to tackle problems whose solution lies beyond the powers of any particular or limited association. Entrusting education or transport or indeed a
sense of common citizenship to the hands of these particular groups leaves ‘partial identities’ in control of the field, and thus fails to develop any sense of common projects and mutual interaction in a broader sphere. While some might see in these arguments the dangers of what Kukathas calls ‘the cultural construction of society’ (Kukathas, 2003, pp. 211–54), this depends on how the idea of political community is understood and deployed.

A somewhat different liberal perspective is provided by those who do not reject the notion of political community as radically as Kukathas, but who still see community in quite minimalist terms. They argue that in view of the cultural diversity of modern liberal-democratic societies, the best that can be hoped for is for citizens to share a sense of belonging to the same political institutions, and to endorse those institutions, while not necessarily sharing the same reasons for doing so. This is what Mason’s idea of an ‘inclusive political community’ amounts to. He draws attention to ‘the particular difficulties associated with fostering a sense of belonging that are created by the coexistence of a diversity of cultural communities’ (Mason, 2000, p. 146). Mason then draws the conclusion that the most appropriate ‘regulative ideal’ is that of an ‘inclusive political community’, which according to him has three main features: its members have a sense of belonging to it; its constitution is a product of an inclusive political dialogue aiming at, though not necessarily achieving, consensus; and finally such an inclusive political community is ruled by a constitution which protects the basic rights to which liberals are committed (Mason, 2000, p. 138). Mason makes the fundamental distinction between ‘belonging to a polity’ and ‘belonging together’. He argues that the former is sufficient for the stability of a liberal-democratic society. This appears to rest on the presupposition that a stronger or ‘thicker’ conception of political community is an unattainable ideal, given the proliferation and greater salience of particular identities based on religion, culture or ethnicity in societies marked by deep diversity.

While this picture of social reality may offer an empirically valid portrait of key features of contemporary liberal democracies, in normative terms it neglects certain dangers which threaten the health of a democratic society. If the salience of particular identities is accepted as the ideal for society, the danger is that society can become too deeply divided, even ghettoised, with no sense of reciprocal interaction or mutual concern. The case has to be made for a stronger community of citizens than is envisaged in Mason’s argument which is satisfied with ‘belonging to a polity’ rather than ‘belonging together’ as the necessary and sufficient criterion for an inclusive political community. A democratic society has to rest on a deeper sense of community, and this in turn has to invoke shared citizenship rights which span or link together the different groups and partial identities which proliferate in contemporary society. The main candidate for fulfilling this role has been seen as a kind of civic nationalism, so one has to examine whether this can realise the political community which (so it is argued here) is necessary for democratic society to function more effectively.
Problems of Civic Nationalism

The question is whether nationalism can answer the search for civic identity which should underpin a democratic society. Does nationalism today express the search for civic unity, or should those who aim at civic identity or political community cease to put their faith in the politics of nationalism, and seek other paths towards a ‘community of citizens’, to use the term of Dominique Schnapper (Schnapper, 1994)? Schnapper herself provides an uncompromising statement of the argument that the nation provides the social bond which alone is appropriate for a modern democratic society, and that it does so by transcending particular affiliations through politics. She invokes ‘political space as the place of transcendence of all kinds of particular affiliations through citizenship’ (Schnapper, 1994, p. 24) and the nation as ‘the political form of the contemporary democratic age’ (Schnapper, 1994, p. 32).

Nationalism does indubitably satisfy the demand for community and provide people with an identity and a sense of belonging (Poole, 1999). It is clear, however, that this can take dangerous forms if the nation is defined in ethnic terms, as a community of descent, with a particular culture available only to those born into that national group, sharing in it through their ancestors. This form of nationalism has an innate and strong tendency to exclusionism: it is closed to newcomers, who can never join this community, however much they try. Such a discourse is typical of ‘integral nationalism’ in which the nation is defined in closed exclusive terms and seen as the highest social unit (Alter, 1994).

Thus, in order to achieve a sense of community which leads to a broad civic identity, not all forms of nationalism are appropriate. The task could only be achieved by a civic nationalism in which the nation is open to new members. It would have to involve a common public culture which defines the nation as a political community, an association of all those who share the same political rights and whose common identity is defined in those political terms. The USA could be seen as such a political community, at least in its aspiration. Its citizens have a variety of different ethnic backgrounds, particular cultures, histories and group loyalties, but they are all Americans who live under a common constitution and share the same political rights. This creates a civic identity which is both nationalistic in this political sense and which overrides the particularistic ethnic affiliations and groups in which individuals are embedded. However, the reality in the USA and other long-established civic nations is much more complex: ‘the idea of a unity of allegiance seems suspect even for older states where the nation appears to be a changing exclusive body denying membership to a significant portion of the population’ (Migdal, 2004, p. 27).

It is true that historically speaking such a civic form of nationalism was backed up by very real political and social forces, involved in the formation of the modern nation state and the processes of its establishment and development. The modern nation state had a dominant ethnic group at its origin, but in the course of
modern history it expanded to take in new members. The cost of entry was indeed a kind of assimilation, but assimilation into a broad political or republican community. This was relatively indifferent to a person’s ethnic origins, at least in theory, as long they accepted the gospel of republican solidarity. One well-known and often-cited example of this is the French Third Republic with its strongly marked republican rituals, cult of ‘solidarism’ and the missionary zeal of its teachers who made the school the agency for spreading republican, and secular, values: ‘the republicans of the Third Republic on their arrival in power in the 1880s very consciously created the institutions charged with forming the modern nation’ (Schnapper, 1994, p. 66). To adopt the terms of Andreas Wimmer, the fully formed nation state is a ‘cultural compromise’, in which the state elite gains greater power while the population at large secures rights of citizenship. But such an inclusive form of social closure is not always achieved: ‘when the exchange of political loyalty for participation, security and freedom fails, an encompassing national identity overarching ethno-regional distinctions is unlikely to emerge’ (Wimmer, 2002, p. 66).

If such a form of encompassing national identity can be achieved, it clearly represents or exemplifies civic community. It offers a community which is based on shared political values, a club which in principle anyone can join. It has what David Miller calls a common public culture, which is not fixed in unalterable form, but can evolve with changing history (Miller, 1995, pp. 25–7). It can and must respond to the demands of new members, reshaping itself to meet a changing reality. Furthermore, this idea of the nation is not an abstract construction of intellectuals. It rests on the whole history of the modern nation state; indeed it is the expression of the modern nation state as the aspiration to create the fraternity along with the liberty and equality of the modernist tradition which started in 1789. Versions of this ideal have been endorsed by theorists like David Miller, Schnapper and Jürgen Habermas, with his conception of constitutional patriotism (Verfassungspatriotismus) (Habermas, 1998). While Habermas appears in the present analysis both as a civic nationalist and (below) as a post-nationalist, this suggests that a call for political community either presupposes the nation as its framework, or, and this seems to be Habermas’s latest position (Habermas, 2001), it seeks to move in a post-nationalist direction, divorcing political values and democratic rights from any national framework or context whatsoever. Both positions have their limitations as attempts to ground a strong concept of political community. Critics have pointed out that so-called civic nations rely on a particular cultural basis, so that in reality they are not purely civic, but are rather what Bernard Yack calls ‘political communities that impart a kind of inherited cultural identity quite unforeseen by Enlightenment liberals’ (Yack, 1999, p. 115).

While civic nationalism may historically have been able to provide the basis for an overarching political community, with the caveats noted above, it is no longer able to achieve that end, or can do so only to a more limited extent than before. Here it is possible to give only some general indications of this decreased capacity
of the civic nation state to guarantee political community. As an empirical example, one could take ‘the destructuring (déstructuration) of French national society’ analysed by the French sociologist Michael Wieviorka and his colleagues (Wieviorka et al., 1999, p. 47), which he ascribes to three broad sets of factors. These are: the changes in industrial society and the decline of broad class identities as central ones; secondly, a crisis of republican institutions; and thirdly, what he calls a nationalist retraction, ‘a collapse, whether temporary or not we do not know, of open and modernising conceptions of the nation’ (Wieviorka et al., 1999, p. 64).

If these indications are valid, and not just in the French case, there is a need to look elsewhere in the search for civic identity, even though there may be no easy solutions to the question of establishing forms of political community. The dilemma is that liberalism, as the dominant ideology in this supposedly post-ideological society, is unable to offer an answer to the problems of community (Beiner, 2003). The neoliberalism hegemonic in contemporary liberal-democratic society is severely lacking in any basis for political community (Harvey, 2005). On the other hand, while nationalism offers the promise of community, or collective identity, its necessarily cultural biases mean that national identity may not be equivalent to civic identity: ‘the more that citizens become fixated on cultural differences within the political community, the more difficult it becomes to sustain an experience of common citizenship’ (Beiner, 2003, p. 28). The modern nation state and the civic nationalism that accompanied it used to be functional in creating common citizenship and the sense of political community. But the structures of the nation state are now less adequate to the task. So where else are the bases for political community in the contemporary world to be found? If the search is abandoned, then the consequence would be a world without community, a society of ‘encapsulation’ lacking the spirit of solidarity and political affinity without which a democratic society could exist only in a weak form.

Post-nationalist Answers

Some of these points are made by those who take up a post-nationalist stance, emphasising the inadequacy of the nation, in however civic a form, as the basis for political community (Tambini, 2001). Those sympathetic to such a position maintain that a democratic community does not need a common culture or shared historical traditions in order to hold itself together and to sustain democratic politics. In any case this is not possible because in contemporary society the phenomena of migration, the greater flows of people across borders and multicultural diversity within the nation mean that there is no common culture to unite people. Therefore forms of nationalism relying on such a shared political culture or common historical memories are inadequate if the aim is to sustain forces making for civic identity. It is thus hopeless to hanker after the model of the French Third Republic, with all citizens reading the same textbooks and being imbued with common republican values. Since that is a situation impossible to
achieve, no forms of national identity, however civic or political in form, can constitute the basis for democratic politics. Some advocates of ‘global civil society’ suggest that if deeper identity is needed, it is more likely to be achieved through anti-globalisation movements where transnational solidarity might be developed (Kaldor, 2003). Civic identity might be achieved through movements which span national boundaries, like the ones described by Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink in their study *Activists across Borders* (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Political community is to be sought in those movements of a new type which link citizens who share particular interests, and in movements of people fighting on specific issues who come together in the struggle to enlarge the bounds of democratic community beyond the now outdated ones of the nation state.

However, this position is not entirely convincing, because what Habermas calls ‘the post-national constellation’ (Habermas, 2001) does not create the stronger ties that are necessary for a functioning democratic community, with a shared public space and a common language of communication. The institutions, shared traditions and reciprocal identification needed to sustain a civic identity are still at an embryonic stage on the international level. The movements of global civil society cited in the previous paragraph are often too issue-oriented or issue-specific to shape a broad political identity. Moreover, if post-national positions suggest that citizens are united (to the extent they are) by agreement on political or constitutional principles, it still begs the question of why we identify more strongly with certain groups of people, seeing them as fellow citizens, and not others, so that as Yack points out, ‘individual rights and political freedoms depend to a certain extent on the contingencies and vagaries of shared memory and identity’ (Yack, 1999, p. 110). Hence this ‘post-national’ position does not offer anything, except in weak potential form, that could explain why members of contemporary liberal-democratic societies consider themselves as members of a particular political community with its own traditions, public culture and symbols of shared democratic rights.

If these arguments are all correct, there would seem to be little hope of achieving what was argued to be the precondition of a democratic society, namely the sustaining of a strong sense of political community. Are there then any ways in which an ideal of political community could be realised, since both the ‘civic nationalist’ perspective and the ‘post-national’ one seem severely problematic? The solution proposed here does not deny that the nation does retain some significance as a basis for political community, since historically the idea of the nation has provided the context in which people have recognised each other as fellow citizens, in the pre-political community of the nation. But while this still provides the framework within which political community is to be developed, it is not enough. Efforts of political will are needed to foster and develop an idea of political community, and this has to include non-nationals or new members of the nation who do not share the historical and cultural legacies or public culture inherent in the nation. Thus national affiliation has provided the starting point for
political community, but in the contemporary situation a more inclusive and activist stance is needed to achieve political community. The remainder of this article is devoted to sketching out what that might be, and to suggesting the advantages to be derived from it in terms of democratic solidarity.

A Model of Active Political Community

Political solidarity can no longer be spontaneously reproduced or created, since ‘there is no longer an automatic reproduction of solidarities, civic friendship, participation in public life, and charitable care toward neighbours’ (Brunkhorst, 2005, p. 82). How then can such solidarity be brought into being, and maintained in existence, and why is this necessary for a healthy democratic community? The essential point is that a democratic political community must combine two aspects, which pull against each other. It must affirm an idea of equality, of equal rights and equal recognition or respect. Yet this community must be a community of difference, a ‘being-in-common’ which does not aspire to a common being, since a common being threatens diversity and brings with it the possibility of stifling difference under some common values which could be imposed, in some cases coercively, on members of the community. The community envisaged here would be one which realises in practice the culture described in very abstract terms by William Connolly as the antithesis to a ‘normalising society’. Such a ‘normalising society’ endorses some identities, and treats all others as dangerously deviant. Connolly envisages in opposition to such a society the ideal of a culture of selective collaboration and agonistic respect in relations between a variety of intersecting and interdependent constituencies, none of which sets the unquestioned matrix within which the others are placed’ (Connolly, 1995, p. 92, emphasis in original).

In practical terms this would involve the creation or promotion of a political community which encourages its members to associate in some active way with each other, ‘to cultivate a more generous ethics of engagement between contending constituencies’ (Connolly, 1995, p. 89). This limits the degree of separation into encapsulated or ghettoised communities whose members relate solely or primarily to those sharing the values of the subgroup to which they belong, but who have no incentive to interact with fellow citizens in a broader sense.

If the crucial thrust of Nancy’s analysis is that there can be no ‘common being’ but ‘in place of such a communion, there is communication’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 28), then the practical challenge for democratic politics is to create and develop institutions through which this communication and ‘mutual interpellation of singularities’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 29) can take place. This would imply some public fora in which this reciprocal exchange might be possible. It is noteworthy that studies of the recent French riots point to the missed opportunities caused by excluding possible interlocutors drawn from the localities themselves from any discussion: ‘The government must agree to share power with the local inhabitants’ (Mucchielli and Le Goaziou, 2006, p. 90). Translating Nancy’s ideas into the
political practice of contemporary liberal democracies thus requires instituting fora within which his ‘mutual interpellation of singularities’ could take place. This in turn demands forms of decentralised and associative politics, rather than communion in one single republican solidaristic communion. The ideas of a ‘community of finitude’ (Nancy, 1991, p. 27) may seem a long way away from traditional invocations of republican solidarity. Yet the argument pursued here suggests that political community can be achieved through a different style and new institutions of politics, which achieve solidarity through a greater faith in the associative capacity of citizens. This means the creation of institutions at a local level which give scope for the realisation of that capacity.

There are some interesting indications of what that might mean in practice in a recent study of the French ‘crisis of the suburbs’. Jacques Donzelot proposes a politics ‘for the city’ rather than a ‘politics of the city’ (Donzelot, 2006, p. 174). He suggests that such a politics would require increasing the power of city dwellers, ‘to reunify the city by democratising it’ through a new body directly elected for the whole conurbation, ‘un conseil d’agglomération élu au suffrage universel’ (Donzelot, 2006, p. 166). Such a body, he argues, could replace the superficial, rapid and often ritualistic participation presently on offer in projects of urban renewal, and help restore a ‘spirit of the city’ which would prevent its current fragmentation into the three zones of gentrified areas, prison-like ‘sink estates’ (‘zones de relégation’) and what he calls the ‘peri-urbanisation’ of quasi-rural suburbs (Donzelot, 2006, pp. 173–88). While he does not refer to Nancy’s work, it could be suggested that his proposals to ‘reunify the city’ (Donzelot, 2006, p. 173) provide a practical illustration of political community which does not aim at fusion into a common being but rather at a ‘mutual compearing’ through extended forms of political representation and through a form of social mixing achieved by greater mobility rather than by imposition from above by the state (Donzelot, 2006, pp. 77–94).

While only illustrative, such proposals have the merit of avoiding an unrealistic model of excessive citizen mobilisation forced from above, reminiscent of former state socialist regimes. The model of political community proposed here does not impose a particular conception of the good life, but rather creates institutions which make it possible for citizens, if they so wish, to make some active contribution to the public sphere. It would thus privilege a stance of active citizenship above one of withdrawal into a private realm, whether this private realm was conceived individually or as a sphere of particular group activity. This endorsement of active citizenship would not however constitute the imposition of a specific concept of the good or of any one set of particular values. It would at most be equivalent to an insistence that living in a democratic society requires its members to manifest their allegiance to ideals of mutual respect and citizen activity, seen as corollaries of membership of a society of citizens.¹ This allegiance and active citizenship are compatible with a very wide range of personal values and concepts of the good life, so in this way the republican state envisaged here
does not impose a particular concept of what is good. It merely draws out certain implications of what it is to live in a democratic community, and seeks to encourage the active and public manifestation of those values. They can be summed up as ones of equal recognition and respect, and of active involvement in the collective decision-making of society at some level, which need not be national, but could be local, or regional.

Conclusion

The argument can be finally summed up as follows: a concept of political community is needed if democracy is to work properly, which entails proposals for its practical realisation. Forms of liberalism which limit themselves to ‘modus vivendi’ or mutual tolerance cannot achieve this. Nor can an idea of political community which is based on the mere fact of living under shared political institutions. A democratic society requires something stronger in what is shared by its members, and demands that they do something to affirm in practical and public ways their membership of a democratic collective in which all participate on equal terms. What this kind of political community involves is a disposition to affirm in practical ways the membership of this democratic body, and a state of republican values that encourages and facilitates this. Such facilitation would mean the creation of political institutions which bring together members of different subgroups of the wider society, so that they can engage in dialogue with each other, and move away from the ‘encapsulated’ model of mutual indifference and distance. There are implications here for educational policy, suggesting the problems stemming from schools which recruit in ways that perpetuate or deepen existing cultural, ethnic or social divisions. While Nancy’s ideas of ‘being-in-common’ might seem to undermine any invocation of republican solidarity, such a fluid understanding of community as communication can represent a revision rather than a replacement of republican ideals.

Citizens are thus envisaged as sharing a stronger sense of active involvement in democratic community, which is compatible with whatever particular concepts of the good life each of them may have, so that the danger of what Nancy calls ‘common being’ is averted. Since the conception of democratic community envisaged here involves an active and practical element of contributing to an association of citizens, it also goes further than post-national perspectives. These post-national perspectives often remain at the level of acceptance of the rights of individuals everywhere to be respected, irrespective of the particular country in which they find themselves. These ideas are insufficiently practical, and too abstract, since they require only the acknowledgement of a set of rights, and not the practical activity to affirm and recognise those rights which has been stressed here.

In short, the answer to the question of whether political community is possible is an affirmative one, based on the assumption that it has to be thought of in new ways, less closed and unitary than in many formulations of such ideals. If the
arguments developed here are convincing, then it should be recognised that political community is necessary for democracy to work, and that it is possible even in contemporary conditions of ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman, 2000) with their diversity of identities and cultures. The arguments presented here use Nancy’s criticism of community as a project of fusion to suggest the possibility of realising ‘being-in-common’ through opening up the republican state in new ways. This would require creating and fostering political institutions which make possible interaction between citizens of different belief systems and identities. These arguments suggest that liberal conceptions of community are inadequate, while nationalist perspectives rest on unrealistic assumptions of a shared national culture which is of declining significance in contemporary liberal-democratic societies. Those who defend post-nationalist conceptions of democracy beyond the nation state make their pitch at too abstract a level. By emphasising democratic rights and values at this supranational level they neglect the question of the input of citizens into democratic community, and the institutions which would help make this a possibility.

Political community is thus both possible and necessary if democracy is to grow. Such community is a ‘being-in-common’, not a ‘common being’, and it does not require commitment to one particular view of the good. It does however assume a willingness to associate on terms of equality and reciprocity with fellow citizens. This form of democratic solidarity has to be fostered by a state of a particular kind, a republican state which takes these values seriously. The facts of diversity of contemporary society make this task more difficult than in previous times. They do not, however, make it impossible. On the contrary, recognition of the difficulty of achieving political community should go hand in hand with realisation of the importance of the task, if democratic society is to meet the challenges of a world in which solidarity is constantly threatened by ghettoisation, encapsulation and the more vigorous assertion of distinct identities which have to be recognised and respected yet also transcended in the interests of democratic solidarity.

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Notes

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The terms ‘compearance’ and ‘compearing’ are taken from the English translation of Nancy’s French text using the word ‘comparution’. This was a word invented by Nancy for which there is no real English equivalent, although it is now often translated as ‘appearance’. Nancy’s meaning is that of a sort of appearing before or being considered by someone else.
It is true that there is a danger of latent authoritarianism here, as was pointed out by reviewers of previous versions of this article. But the argument maintained here is designed to distinguish the genuinely voluntary nature of active citizenship, stimulated by institutions that make it possible, from the quite different phenomenon of the officially approved ‘good comrade’ (or ‘good citizen’) imposed from above by regimes such as those of twentieth-century Eastern bloc socialism.

References