THEMES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Titles in this series

Community

Seeking Safety in an Insecure World

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Polity

Contents

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. Com-
pany 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 experi-
ence 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 'non-communal' 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 com-

munity 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 self-proclaimed 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

1

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 Tönnies[1] 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, cut-throat 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 appreci-

ate 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 'artifi-
cially produced' or merely imagined, would have much
chance of falling into that contradiction. Robert Redfield[2]
would agree with Tönnies that in a true community there
is no motivation towards reflection, criticism or experi-
mentation; but, he would hurry to explain, this is the case
because community is true to its nature (or to its ideal
model) only in as far as it is *distinctive* from other human
groupings (it is apparent 'where the community begins
and where it ends'), *small* (so small as to be all within
view of all its members), and *self-sufficient* (so that, as
Redfield insists, it 'provides for all or more of the activities
and needs of the people in it. The little community is a
cradle-to-the-grave arrangement').

Redfield's choice of attributes is anything but random.
'Distinctiveness' means: the division into 'us' and 'them'
is exhaustive as much as it is disjunctive, there are no
'betwixt and between' cases left, it is crystal-clear who is
'one of us' and who is not, there is no muddle and no
cause for confusion – no cognitive ambiguity, and so no
behavioural ambivalence. 'Smallness' means: communi-
cation among the insiders is all-embracing and dense,
and so casts the signals sporadically arriving 'from the
outside' into disadvantage by reason of their comparative
rarity, superficiality and perfunctory character. While 'self-
sufficiency' means: isolation from 'them' is close to com-
plete, the occasions to break it are few and far between.
All three features join forces in effectively protecting the
members of the community from challenges to their habit-
ual ways. As long as each and every one of the triune traits

stays intact, it is indeed highly unlikely that the motivation
to reflection, criticism and experimentation would ever
arise.

As long as . . . Indeed, the pristine unity of the Redfield
'little community' depends on blocking the channels of
communication with the rest of the inhabited world. The
unity of community, as Redfield would say, or the 'natur-
alness' of communal understanding, as Tönnies would
prefer to call it, are both made of the same stuff: of
homogeneity, of *sameness*.

The sameness finds itself in trouble the moment its
conditions begin to crumble: when the balance between
'inside' and 'outside' communication, once skewed
sharply towards the interior, gets more even, thereby
blurring the distinction between 'us' and 'them'. The
sameness evaporates once the communication between its
insiders and the world outside becomes more intense and
carries more weight than the mutual exchanges of the
insiders.

Precisely such a breach in the protective walls of com-
munity became a foregone conclusion with the appearance
of mechanical means of transportation; carriers of alterna-
tive information (or people whose very strangeness was
information distinct from, and clashing with, the knowl-
edge internally available) could now in principle travel as
quickly or faster than the word-of-mouth messages origi-
nating and circulated within the circumference of 'natural'
human mobility. Distance, once the most formidable
among the communal defences, lost much of its signifi-
cance. The mortal blow to the 'naturalness' of communal
understanding was delivered, however, by the advent of
informatics: the emancipation of the flow of information
from the transport of bodies. Once information could
travel independently of its carriers, and with a speed far
beyond the capacity of even the most advanced means of

transportation (as in the kind of society we all nowadays inhabit), the boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' could no longer be drawn, let alone sustained.

From now on, all homogeneity must be 'hand-picked' from a tangled mass of variety through selection, separation and exclusion; all unity needs to be *made*; concord 'artificially produced' is the sole form of unity available. Common understanding can be only an *achievement*, attained (if at all) at the end of a long and tortuous labour of argument and persuasion and in strenuous competition with an indefinite number of other potentialities – all vying for attention and each promising a better (more correct, more effective or more pleasurable) assortment of life tasks and solutions for life problems. And if reached, common agreement will be never free of the memory of such past struggles and the choices made in their course. However firmly it holds, therefore, no agreement will appear as 'natural' and as 'self-evident' as in the communities of Tönnies or Redfield, whatever its spokespeople and promoters do to portray it as such. It will be never immune from further reflection, contest and argument; if anything, it may reach the status of a 'rolling contract', an agreement to agree which needs to be periodically renewed, without any renewal carrying a guarantee of a next one.

Community of common understanding, even if reached, will therefore stay fragile and vulnerable, forever in need of vigilance, fortification and defence. People who dream of community in the hope of finding a long-term security which they miss so painfully in their daily pursuits, and of liberating themselves from the irksome burden of ever new and always risky choices, will be sorely disappointed. Peace of mind, if they find it, will prove to be of the 'until further notice' kind. Rather than an island of 'natural understanding', a 'warm circle' where they can lay down their arms and stop fighting, the *really existing*

community will feel like a besieged fortress being continuously bombarded by (often invisible) enemies outside while time and again being torn apart by discord within; ramparts and turrets will be the places where the seekers of communal warmth, homeliness and tranquillity will have to spend most of their time.

This seems to be an observation common to the point of triviality: once 'unmade', a community cannot be, unlike the phoenix with its magical capacity of rising from the ashes, put together again. If it does arise, it won't be in the form preserved in memory (more precisely, conjured up by an imagination whipped up daily by perpetual insecurity) – the only form that makes it look so desirable as a better-than-any-other wholesale solution to all earthly troubles. All this seems pretty obvious, but logic and human dreams seldom if ever walk the same roads. And there are good reasons, as we will see later, for their roads never to converge for long.

As Eric Hobsbawm recently observed, 'never was the word "community" used more indiscriminately and emptily than in the decades when communities in the sociological sense became hard to find in real life';[3] and he commented, 'Men and women look for groups to which they can belong, certainly and forever, in a world in which all else is moving and shifting, in which nothing else is certain.'[4] Jock Young supplied a succinct and poignant gloss on Hobsbawm's observation and commentary: 'Just as community collapses, identity is invented.'[5]

'Identity', today's talk of the town and the most commonly played game in town, owes the attention it attracts and the passions it begets to being a *surrogate of community*: of that allegedly 'natural home' or that circle that stays warm however cold the winds outside. Neither of the two is available in our rapidly privatized and individualized, fast globalizing world, and for that reason each of

the two can be safely, with no fear of practical test, imagined as a cosy shelter of security and confidence and for that reason hotly desired. The paradox, though, is that in order to offer even a modicum of security and so to perform any kind of healing or pain-soothing role, identity must belie its origin; it must deny being 'just a surrogate' – it needs to conjure up a phantom of the self-same community which it has come to replace. Identity sprouts on the graveyard of communities, but flourishes thanks to the promise of a resurrection of the dead.

A life dedicated to the search for identity is full of sound and fury. 'Identity' means standing out: being different, and through that difference unique – and so the search for identity cannot but divide and separate. And yet the vulnerability of individual identities and the precariousness of solitary identity-building prompt the identity-builders to seek pegs on which they can together hang their individually experienced fears and anxieties, and having done that, perform the exorcism rites in the company of other similarly afraid and anxious individuals. Whether such 'peg communities' provide what it is hoped they offer – collective insurance against individually confronted uncertainties – is a moot question; but no doubt marching shoulder to shoulder along a street or two, mounting a barricade in the company of others or rubbing elbows in crowded trenches may supply a momentary respite from loneliness. With good, bad, or no results, something at least has been done; one can derive some comfort from having refused to offer a sitting target and from having raised one's hands against the blows. Little wonder, therefore, that – as Jonathan Friedman warns us – in our fast globalizing world 'one thing that is not happening is that boundaries are disappearing. Rather, they seem to be erected on every new street corner of every declining neighbourhood of our world.'[6]

Despite the claims of the boundary guards, the boundaries they protect have not been drawn to fence off and defend the distinctiveness of the already existing identities. As the great Norwegian anthropologist Frederick Barth explained, the opposite is the rule: the ostensibly shared 'communal' identities are after-effects or by-products of forever unfinished (and all the more feverish and ferocious for that reason) boundary drawing. It is only when the border poles are being dug in and the guns are aimed at trespassers that the myths of the borders' antiquity are spun and the recent cultural/political origins of identity are carefully covered up by the 'genesis stories'. This stratagem attempts to belie the fact that (to quote Stuart Hall)[7] one thing that the idea of identity does *not* signal is a 'stable core of the self, unfolding from the beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change.'

Contemporary seekers of community are doomed to share Tantalus' lot; their purpose is bound to elude them, and it is their own earnest and zealous effort to grasp it that prompts it to recede. The hope of respite and tranquillity which makes the community of their dreams so enticing will be dashed each time they declare, or are told, that the communal home they have sought has been found. The agonies of Tantalus will be joined, and made more agonizing yet, by those of Sisyphus. 'The really existing community' will be unlike their dreams – more like their opposite: it will add to their fears and insecurity instead of quashing them or putting them to rest. It will call for twenty-four hours a day vigilance and a daily resharpening of swords; for struggle, day in day out, to keep the aliens off the gates and to spy out and hunt down the turncoats in their own midst. And to add a final touch of irony, it is only through all that pugnacity, wolf-crying and sword-brandishing that the feeling of being *in* a community, of *being a community*, may be kept lingering

and protected from evaporation. Homely cosiness is to be sought, day in day out, on the front line.

It is as if the sword thrust to the East of Eden still stood there, swirling ominously. By the sweat of your brow you may gain your daily bread – but no amount of sweating will ever reopen the closed gate to communal innocence, pristine sameness and tranquillity.

It is not as though we are likely to stop knocking at that gate and hoping to force it open. Not as long as we are as we presently are and as long as the world we inhabit is as it presently is.

Using Paul Klee's drawing as his inspiration, Walter Benjamin gave the following description of 'the Angel of History':

> his face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling up wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from the Paradise; it has got hold of his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.[8]

The Angel of History moves with his back turned to the future, and so his eyes fixed to the past. He moves because since he left the paradise he cannot stop – he has not seen a sight agreeable enough to make him wish to pause and admire it at rest. What keeps him moving is disgust and repulsion for what he sees: the all-too-visible horrors of the past, not the lure of the future which he can neither clearly see nor fully appreciate. Progress, Benjamin implies, is not a chase after the birds in the sky, but a frantic urge to fly away from the corpses spattered over past battlefields.

If Walter Benjamin's reading of the meaning of 'progress' is correct, as I believe it is, then – as human happiness goes – history is neither a straight line nor a cumulative process, as its famed 'Whig version' wished us to believe. Repulsion, not attraction, being history's principal moving force, historical change happens because humans are mortified and annoyed by what they find painful and unpalatable in their condition, because they do not wish these conditions to persist, and because they seek the way to mollify or redress their suffering. Getting rid of what, momentarily, pains us most brings relief – but that respite is as a rule short-lived since the 'new and improved' condition quickly reveals its own, previously invisible and unanticipated, unpleasant aspects and brings new reasons to worry. In addition, one person's meat is another person's poison, and people in flight are hardly ever unanimous in their selection of which realities need attention and reform. Each step away from the present will be eyed with enthusiasm by some, with apprehension by others. 'Progress' is a prominent member of the family of 'hotly contested concepts'. The balance of the past, the assessment of the present and the appreciation of the futures are all conflict-ridden and strewn with ambivalence.

There is good reason to conceive of the course of history as pendulum-like, even if in other respects it may be portrayed as linear: freedom and security, both equally pressing and indispensable, happen to be hard to reconcile without friction – and considerable friction most of the time. These two qualities are, simultaneously, complementary and incompatible; the likelihood of their falling into conflict has always been and will forever be as high as the need for their reconciliation. Though many forms of human togetherness have been tried in the course of history, none has succeeded in finding a flawless solution to this truly 'squaring the circle' kind of task.

Promoting security always calls for the sacrifice of freedom, while freedom can only be expanded at the expense of security. But security without freedom equals slavery (and in addition, without an injection of freedom, proves to be in the end a highly insecure kind of security); while freedom without security equals being abandoned and lost (and in the end, without an injection of security, proves to be a highly unfree kind of freedom). This circumstance gives philosophers a headache with no known cure. It also makes living together conflict-ridden, as security sacrificed in the name of freedom tends to be *other people's* security; and freedom sacrificed in the name of security tends to be *other people's* freedom.

2

Rerooting the Uprooted

Pico della Mirandola put down in pen the text of a speech which neither God, the speaker, nor Adam, the spoken to, took care to record. It went, roughly, like this: 'The other creatures have a defined nature prescribed by me. You may determine your own limits according to your own will . . . Like a free and sovereign artificer, you can fashion your own form out of your own substance.' The message of that unrecorded speech was breathtakingly exhilarating news for the men of substance, though not at all exciting for all the rest, who did not have enough substance to 'fashion their own form' freely and 'according to their own will'. The year was 1486, the place was Italy sending its ships to the far corners of the world so that the shipowners, their courtiers and passengers (though not the sailors or the dockers) could get richer by the year and view the world as their oyster. Modern individuality of the ecclesiastical canon: the God of the Bible meant a sentence of untied and unfixed existence as retribution and punishment. The Renaissance God speaking through Pico portrayed that sentence as reward and an Act of Grace. If the biblical text was but a half-truth, its Renaissance correction was no better.

In their study of the new era of inequalities, Jean-Paul Fitoussi and Pierre Rosanvallon ponder the 'ambivalence of modern individualism':