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Annalisa Pelizza

Communities at a Crossroads: Material Semiotics for Online Sociability in the Fade of Cyberculture, Amsterdam, Institute of Networked Cultures, 2018, pp. 226

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"Digital community" is a tricky term. It is used in such a variety of contexts, that both words constituting it had almost lost a meaning. Giant social networking sites like Facebook, influencers with thousands of followers, small activist groups, neighbors, who have a chat for solving everyday issues – this is just a small list of those who can name themselves as participants of an online community. Moreover, not only these groups, but plenty of scholars follow this definition and write about digital and/or online communities and their role, structure, dynamics, etc. It becomes almost impossible to outline the boundaries of the concept. Probably, it is not a term at all, and we should abandon its conceptual roots and speak about all the listed phenomena only nominalistically describing them, shouldn't we? But even when we would try to avoid this word, it will pursue us of speaking about "members" or "participants". So what we need in this situation as scholars is probably not to escape the vagueness of the term "community", but to face it, analyze its controversies and

make the boundaries more evident and clear.

This was one of the challenges taken by Annalisa Pelizza in her book *Communities at crossroads*. The book was written between 2007 and 2009, so now it "can be read under the lens of a double archaeology" (p. 6), witnessing those processes and addressing that period's view backward from both 2009 and the present time. Readers can also enable their own historical approach to analyze the difference between that period and the contemporary times. However, the book is not historical, it is rather conceptual. The author's ambition is more than just the "online community analysis". Pelizza, indeed, "raises questions […] to [...] the foundations of 21st century social theory on the demise of social engagement and sense of community prompted by technological societies" (p. 149).

The book starts with a theoretical investigation of what community is and with the critical review of the myths and foundations of this term. In the empirical part, the author follows the actors working in Linz (Austria) with the archive of the *Prix Ars Electronica*'s Digital Community competition for digital social projects, awarded in the framework of the *Ars Electronica Festival for Art, Technology and Society*. Pelizza undertakes a rather sophisticated analysis of the participants of these competitions, who describe what is their community and why it deserves to obtain a prize. The new understandings of a "community", that Pelizza has found in the fieldwork, are contrasted with the "mythological" history of the term, considered in the first part of the book. In the end, Pelizza focuses on the different approaches to the understanding of action going beyond the very communities she analyzes.

The very problem of community, and how it is connected with action, traces back to Frederic Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. Pelizza states that the distinction between these two types of sociality created a problematic field for the theorists who followed, and brought, as well, a "dystopic understanding of modern relations in contemporary theorizations of online sociability" (p. 149). Dystopia here is more connected with "society", while "community" is its opposite, that people have lost in the big cities world. Revisiting in this way such foundational opposition, Pelizza's book calls up Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the Social*, which from the very beginning challenges our understanding of social as a part of binary. *Communities at a Crossroads*, indeed, follows the same approach to the ontology as an inseparable, which is part of Latour's (2005) intellectual programs

The literature review which follows has a specific critical aim. Pelizza reconstructs the myth of the community and the internet (and networks before it). She starts with Howard Rheingold's book *The Virtual Community* and treats Rheingold's communities as "rhetorical performative endeavor to merge multiple streams in a coherent account of online sociability" (p. 78). This endeavor seems to be undoubtedly libertarian and based on the mythology that flourished around the online

communities in the end of the 20th century. This mythology is traced back to the cold-war cybernetics and to decentralisation attempts that were inscribed in it. The key features of this particular understanding of communities are the following: treating the internet as an "intrinsically ungovernable machine, the creative coalition between knowledge workers and internet companies, and the spontaneous interactions of internet users producing wealth and political participation as well as empowerment" (p. 147). Pelizza opposes Geert Lovink's "organised networks" to these concepts. However, this term does not itself replace the dominating "communities", rather being a critical alternative to it. .

Looking at the following historical and epistemological changes, Pelizza provides the reasons of the crisis of these myths: geography matters, so that internet results to be more and more controlled and territorialized, the emergence of a creative class related to the coalition between knowledge workers and internet companies crumbled after the Dotcom burst, the idea that digital commons might empower the most disadvantaged ones failed.

Despite these crises, the communities, as concept, persist and are already embedded into those that followed and are still a rather popular approaches to understanding the digital and contemporary sociality. Pelizza focuses on the research projects carried out by Patrice Flichy, Manuel Castells and Barry Wellman. Flichy's project seems to be rather productive from Pelizza's point of view. She praises his reconstruction of the early digital cultures on BBS, Fidonet, etc. and the taxonomy of those, based on three features: "geographical proximity, institutional belonging, degree of face-to-face knowledge''(p. 42). By contrast both Wellman and Castells are treated as proponents of the mythological approach. The main problem is the following one: the two authors become not sensitive to the definition of the group and types of the participants, focusing on the individual action, treating the internet as a space and proposing an essentialistic understanding of the community. However, Pelizza does not introduce here the idea that these different metaphors (like "space" or the very notion of community "community") might themselves influence the research optics (Markham 1998; Van der Boomen 2014).

In order to provide a contrasting fieldwork-based argument, Pelizza maps the words that people use to describe their communities, reveals the relations among them and analyzes the cases more in detail. Then these results are implemented in the theoretical discussion in order to oppose the communities described by the people taking part in them to the "mythological ones". The approach works, for instance, when one "ideal" locality does not turn to be so monolithic, but splits into two of them: the rural and the urban and Pelizza is able to show it. Or, when she is able to brings to the surface the "comparison between HCI, on one side, and sociology of technology and semiotics, on the other side [...][A]ccording to the first approach the subjects of communication pre-exist to the

interactive process, according to the second school subjectivity gets installed through the communicational process" (p. 111). This comparison will be important to further develop the key argument about the definition of technology as mediator or intermediary.

The mapping of the diversity allows to introduce the new criteria to define the online assemblages of software and rules, such as open accounts, regimes of access and visibility that extend the more classical one-to-one or one-to-many. Pelizza also redefines the software as the one that "can articulate the processes whereby a digital assembly is gathered, and different actors are enacted" (p. 143). Such a definition is a step aside from technological determinism and social constructivism, that allows not to lose materiality, as it often happens with the projects on STS and media (see Gillespie, Boczkowski and Foot 2004, as an important endeavor to problematize this).

In the final part of the book, Pelizza suggests a map and some theoretical outcomes. The most evident one is replacing the dichotomy of community/society with a variety of groups and flexible types of sociality. Explaining this variety, Pelizza suggests the new coordinates: stressing "the degree of permeability of the distinction between Addresser and Addressees, Members, and Outside", this map can turn out useful in evaluating the most innovative and progressive digital assemblages" (p. 152).

As an internet studies researcher I find this mapping already useful, but going beyond this mapping, Pelizza provides a theoretical understanding of how the social itself might be thought in a different way. She stresses the double role of the digital artifacts: "the distinction between 'mediation' – a relationship that constitutes actors while taking place – from 'intermediation' – a relationship in which a tool just transports agency from one pre-existing point to another pre-existing point" (p.97). This distinction allows to view different projects and types of social relations and to understand them in a more precise way. This also allows to criticize not only the myths, but also the media and organizations, like Electronic Frontier Foundation (p. 124).

The theoretical ambition of the book is in the end to reassemble the understanding of the social action. Pelizza concludes that "[m]ore than marking the end of social and political commitment, information artefacts, and digital platforms mediate different types of relationships and enact different types of communities. From case to case, information technologies, knowledge, and infrastructures can be conceived of as tools, goals, supporters" (p. 150).

This theoretical claim might seem trivial, as it is rather clear that the material interfaces, platforms and infrastructures are differently participating in the assembling of what we call social. However, if the terms like "software", "technology", "machine" could be re-explained critically at least to some degree, it might be helpful.

The problem I see is that defining the "technological" part of the

community only as mediator or intermediary is again considering as problematic field the social as opposed to the technological. What might be helpful is to bring the same lenses used to look at "community", to look at "digital".

The only further problem with such a program might be a political one. Pelizza's approach is quite helpful in distinguishing communities, which might transform into movements and enable more democratic participation. The reassembled "digital" – i.e. "digital" seen under Pelizza's lenses – might turn on the counterparts of the criticized myths, like the centralization of power and new alliances, e.g. government and business. Then, what we see in contemporary political processes of different countries might be at the same time understood and legitimized.

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Matters of Care. Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, pp. 280

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Few years ago, I got deeply engaged with my colleague Paolo Magaudda in a qualitative research focusing on the development of a grassroots community network (CN) in Italy, originally started in Rome in 2001 under the name of "Ninux.org" to then expand to other Italian cities (see Crabu and Magaudda 2017). CNs are commonly considered as a case of "inverse" infrastructure (Egyedi and Mehos 2012), characterised by being built and self-managed by communities of voluntary people