

60th Lecture at the Gramsci Monument, The Bronx, NYC: 29th August 2013

WHAT IS A COLLECTIVE?

Marcus Steinweg

1. A collective, in my terms, is a community whose members are bound by nothing but the absence of an objective or absolute bond.
2. The collective is perhaps nothing other than the *community without community* evoked by Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot (although in different ways).
3. The bond that binds the subjects bound in the collective does not exist or, it is the factual non-existence of the bond.
4. So how can a collective be imagined which is radically different from all communal structures based on objective criteria or norms, and also from the absolute communities which conjure up an ultimate transcendent ground?
5. The Latin *colligere*, which refers to selecting and gathering together, already indicates the dynamics of gleaning, of collecting bit by bit.
6. *Colligere* means to allow one's gaze to roam in order to create a minimum of order in the disorder which reality is by starting to group its elements together.
7. Now, it is correct to see in the act of grouping a force which is the force of simplification, of reduction.
8. The collective which is a community beyond anything communal must bring in a resistance to the idea of grouping because the collective is obviously a group whose members are too different to bend to a unified principle or a common ideal.
9. The collective I am thinking of is an infinitely fragile construction; a community indeed, but a community that has to make do without a shared ground and without a shared goal.
10. It is the community of those without community in the sense that this community puts its trust in no bond other than the bond of a lack of bond.
11. Therefore it must be said of this community that it does not exist.
12. That is the most extreme sense of the collective, its non-existence and impossibility.
13. Where a collective forms or begins to form, there is already a minimum of shared order, a minimum of consistency of shared hopes and projects; there is also the shared betrayal of the non-existence which ultimately constitutes the collective.
14. If there are no binding criteria regulating the dynamics and existence of the collective, then there is no collective, or there is only the non-existence or the pure possibility of a casting completely hidden in its latency.
15. Whenever a collective is formed it becomes obvious what has to remain occluded: the collective itself as a dream, as an impossibility and latency.
16. The ontological sense of the collective would have to be sought in the domain of dreams that are more than illusions or phantasms.
17. There is the dream of a language which communicates with itself purely and without any detour, the idealism of listening to oneself speak.¹

18. There is the dream of a subject that appears completely within its self-evidence, which radiates almost without matter; that is the dream of a soul overflying its corporality, the dream of the eternal, self-transparent *ego cogito*.
19. There is the dream of a knowledge which no longer has to leave itself to be completely with itself: absolute knowledge identical with itself, pure intelligibility.
20. There is the dream of a future that is completed already today by bending to the thinking that anticipates it.
21. There is the dream of a community which creates its total meaning out of itself, its force and possibility, its stability and duration; dream of a community which is what it is for good reasons and exists per se.
22. The collective, its appearance in the space of history — of cultural, social, political texture — denotes a dream completely different from these dreams.
23. The collective is the dream that interrupts merely dreamy consciousness, the imaginary, and leads it to its limits.
24. The collective is the dream which recognizes itself as impossible.
25. The collective has no appearance in history which would not already be its own betrayal, and it is at the same time nothing other than this self-betraying appearance, nothing other than this dream which recognizes itself as a dream.
26. This distinguishes the collective from the phantasms and dreams arising from the fantasy of a well-founded, guaranteed, teleologically fixed identity.
27. In the collective, the limit of the phantasm of identity is revealed because it includes both, and to the same extent: appearance and non-existence.
28. The absence of objective or absolute criteria is what makes the collective an impossibility: the dream of a community overflying all particularities and interests.
29. And yet, the collective is something other than the universal we-community of transcendental subjectivity which Husserl addresses.
30. Transcendental subjectivity is the we-family of entities of self-consciousness which draw the pure enjoyment of ontological justification from their membership of the transcendental we to which they belong.
31. Participation in the transcendental we makes of the empirical subject a family member completely subjected to the law of the family, in this case, the law which transcendental subjectivity itself is: a law that obliges the subject to self-identity.
32. What I call a collective is the dream-figure of a lawless community of subjects who put their trust in nothing but their singularity and ontological loneliness, a trust which, like all trust, is without ground, blind.
33. One could formulate the difference between the subject of we-subjectivity and the singularity of this hyperbolic trust as follows: the subject of the we-community does not trust because it knows.
34. It is the subject of its knowledge, subject of self-consciousness whose orientation is originally given, programmed knowledge that programs itself further, that remains completely within the framework of a pre-given identity; cadre-subject of its certainties, opinions, hopes and fears which will never completely take possession of it (it can be sure of that) because it knows them to be shared joys and cares.
35. This subject will not fall out of place; it simply can't.

36. It is a subject completely embedded in its ontological family.
37. All its experiences are family excursions.
38. No experience can lead it to the limits of its familiarity which would also allow it to recognize the limits of its communal formations.
39. The subject that I want to call the subject of the collective, however, is a subject related directly to the limit.
40. It is a subject without subjectivity.
41. Instead of profiting from the transcendental patronage of universal subjectivity, this subject moves in its space with other subjects in an incomparably more vulnerable, incomparably more naked way — in its space which is its living space, the dimension beyond any structural or even empirical security, naked living space of a subject of ontological nakedness or poverty insofar as poverty here denotes the richness of a pre-identical or para-identical existence.
42. The subject of the collective dreams, in the midst of the one reality that is the world, the dream of a community of subjects whose coming-together is without identity, i.e. without presupposition, because the world as the only world is already this: the living space of subjects who should not deceive themselves too often about the fact that they stand in direct contact with the incommensurable, with the inconsistency ultimately of their own lives.
43. A collective is a dream with truth value, thus a dream that is more than merely a dream without therefore already becoming reality or possibility.
44. The subject of the collective moves along the watershed between the possible and the impossible.
45. It does not cease to dream the dream of a humanity without exterior while at the same time recognizing this exterior as the proper living space of human beings.
46. The collective is the bond of all human beings under the criterion of a lack of criteria that I call the incommensurable or the truth of the subject, as long as truth here means nothing other than the non-existence of a second world.
47. In the collective, something is realized that resists its representation in the space of appearances: the dream of a community of subjects who, without knowing or understanding one another, share the space of their lives, their happiness and their humiliations in order, in the here-and-now of a shared world, both together and each individual for itself, to explore new forms of living, a new thinking, another reality.

1 Cf. Jacques Derrida, *La voix et le phénomène*, Paris, Puf 1967.