

1.8 MAKING SENSE OF COMMUNITY'S PRE-NORMATIVE MEANING

[FAZENDO SENTIDO DO SENTIDO PRÉ-NORMATIVO DA COMUNIDADE]

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Resumo: No presente artigo, Juan Manuel Garrido, discute a transformação do sentido de sentido no pensamento de Jean-Luc Nancy. Visa mostrar como sentido distingue-se de significado por ser uma prática da própria existência, expondo uma pré-normatividade de princípio. Por fim, com base na incompletude e indecidibilidade constitutivas do sentido, Garrido busca demonstrar como essas duas marcas entreabrem uma compreensão da relação entre ontologia e política, onde a comunidade se define como comum de sentido e não como deliberação de um sentido comum.

Palavras-chave: sentido; significado; pré-normatividade; comunidade; ontologia; política

Abstract: In this article, Juan Manuel Garrido discusses the transformation of the sense of sense in Jean-Luc Nancy's thought. It aims to show how sense differs from signification insofar as it is rather a practice of existence itself, exposing a pre-normativity as its own principle. Finally, based on the incompleteness and undecidability constitutive of sense, Garrido demonstrates how these two marks open up an understanding of the relationship between ontology and politics, where community is defined as common formation of sense and not as deliberation of a common sense.

Keywords: sense; meaning; signification; pre-normativity; community; ontology; politics

“Polis” is shaken to its foundations. As it is
“Logos” and for the same reasons.

J. L. Nancy, “Politique et/ou politique”

1. The crisis of meaning

In different occasions, Jean-Luc Nancy begins his analyses concerning meaning (*le sens*) in reaction to certain claims of some philosophical discourses denouncing a “crisis of meaning” (*crise du sens*) afflicting Western culture. In the first lines of *Being Singular Plural*, for instance, Nancy writes: “It is often said today that we have lost the meaning, that we lack it and, as a result, are in need of and waiting for it” (2000, p. 1). Something similar is found at the beginning of *The Sense of the World*: “Not long ago, it was still possible to speak of a ‘crisis of meaning’ (this was Jan Paročka's expression and Vaclav Havel has made use of it)” (1997, p. 2).

The crisis in question is supposed to affect our capacity to create new regulative horizons to understand the historical present of our culture. Regulative horizons are images and figures of individual and collective life that would help us shape and lead human action, human faith and human knowledge in the construction of the world's future. As Nancy points out, however, the very nostalgia and demand for a meaning may easily turn into a regulative horizon. As if it were now to say: “we must lead thinking to the search for a meaning for life,” or: “we must build new horizons, new ideas for the world.” Such claims may be effective enough to provide principles and guidelines for philosophy and action, science and politics, but since they are deprived of content (they consist, precisely, in the demand for content), they end up being reduced to the nihilist gesture of merely negating the given state of things. This manner, the demand for meaning is eventually fulfilled by... any kind of meaning. Written more than 20 years ago, these (premonitory) words reflect Nancy's accurate understanding of the underlying dangers housed in the *fin-de-siècle* complaint about the crisis of meaning: “we are exposed to all the risks of the expectation of, or demand for, a meaning (as on this banner in Berlin, on a theater in 1993: *Wir brauchen Leitbilder*, ‘we need directive images’), [and to] all the fearful traps

that such a demand sets (security, identity, certainty, philosophy as distributor of values, worldviews, and—why not?—beliefs or myths)” (1997, p. 2).

Meaning, however—and this constitutes the main response that Nancy offers to the discourses of the “crisis of meaning,”—cannot be lost. Anyone who claims we have lost the meaning, that we are in want of it, or waiting for it, not only presupposes the search for a meaning as horizon for action and self-understanding (certainly a void, nihilist horizon). In fact, she also presupposes that the lack of a meaning and the demand for new meanings *are already meaningful* to the fellow human. Through the claim about the loss of meaning, something—this very claim—is meant, something is communicated to someone. Those who deplore the loss of meaning, or call to search for, recover or create new meanings, are already taking part in a real, and effective, and meaningful exchange, or communication, or circulation of meaning. Insofar as their call makes sense, even if this sense is unwanted, or false, or difficult, or incomprehensible, or dangerous, they fully and profusely inhabit the realm of meaning.

The meaning of the world, and the meaning that moves or circulates among us, is not lost along with the regretted closure of horizons. On the contrary, the nostalgic talk about the loss of meaning is itself part of a substantial event of meaning. The event of this: that in spite of having lost the meaning we still are together, and we still concern together for our own being and our own destiny. We are together even without common horizons pre-existing and pre-determining our common being. Thus, being together shows itself as being the clearest, and most substantial, event of meaning. Meaning means, first and above all, being together, or being in common, or being with one another—even in the absence of common and shared meanings. “Whether it is aware of it or not, the contemporary discourse about meaning ... brings to light the fact that ‘meaning,’ used in this absolute way, has become the bared [*dénudé*] name of our being-with-one-another. We do not ‘have’ meaning anymore, because we ourselves are meaning—entirely, without reserve, infinitely, with no meaning other than ‘us’” (2000, p. 1).

Along with the nostalgic talk about the loss of meaning, there appears, therefore, the chance of disclosing a deeper understanding of meaning itself: namely, meaning as dissociated from the regulative structure of ideas. This is not simply to dwell in some negative and transitional moment of the process of meaning, the moment of having lost a horizon while keep waiting for a new one to come. This also entails, as we will see, the

dissociation of meaning from horizontality as such, something that modifies deeply our way to understand “meaning” in general. Nancy’s reflection about meaning should of course be taken as an extension of the deconstruction of ideality initiated by Derrida in the 1960s. Meaning as horizon is meaning as pure ideality (think of the Idea in Kantian or in the Platonic sense). Meaning as horizon is meaning as what gives form and contains an otherwise disseminated proliferation of signs. The message conveyed by the symbolic game of singular communicative events, the ideality of trans-historical mathematical objects, the causal reality of things that are reproduced in science practice, the value of someone’s action, the vocation of a community that identifies itself to the representation of its own destiny, and so on: all these abstract entities are every time disposed as horizons that gather, ground, unify and lead concrete, heteroclitic and multiform processes of signification.

Nancy’s philosophical reflection concerning the worldliness of the world, the world that is a world even when it has been exposed to the loss of horizons (of world-views, world-conceptions, *Weltanschauungen*) and to the crisis of meaning¹, was persistently accompanied by a philosophical reflection about the conditions of meaning in general. More than accompanied, in fact. It is probably the reflection about meaning what structures and guides the construction of the concept of community itself, either in its political or in its ontological imports. It is therefore key to understand the relationship between ontology and politics in Nancy. I’ll try to explain this point in the third and final part of this text. Before that, in the next section, I will ask what does “meaning” mean when it is considered as simple or bare communication, as circulation without horizons, taking place even, or especially, when the common understanding and the common experience is interrupted, or lost.

2. Meaning in pre-normative sense

“Meaning is its own communication or its own circulation” (NANCY, 2000, p. 2, translation modified). At first glance, this statement could appear as perfectly trivial. Indeed, the ability to be communicated or to circulate among speakers defines what we call

¹ This was the question of “la mondialisation,” the worldization [globalization], that Nancy raised during the 1990s.

meaning. A “meaning” must be valid for more than one speaker if it is to mean something. A meaning that would not be able to circulate between more than one speaker, or that could not be transmitted, and iterated, would not be called a meaning. To mean something is *eo ipso* to engage in communication; to communicate something is *eo ipso* to take part in some objective or trans-subjective circulation of meaning.

We could also say that there is nothing particularly original in identifying meaning with the fact of being-with-one-another (community). To engage in the adventure of meaning amounts to admit that there are others to which one wishes to speak, to address ideas or to convey feelings. To mean something is to give trans-subjective form to thought (a “purely subjective thought” is, in this sense, meaningless). The otherness of the others is the standard that I bear in mind when I want to give meaningful form to thoughts (even in the cases in which “I talk to myself”). Meaning means, or appears, or exists, or is formed, always for more-than-one. Meaning is co-extensive to the fact of being several, of being in common, of being with one another.

Nevertheless, we must identify two quite different (I am not saying opposite) manners to spell out the statement that “meaning is its own communication and its own circulation.” On the one hand, we could emphasize the trans-subjective character of meaning and focus on the conditions for its objective validity—in sum, its normative character. On the other hand, we may shift the emphasis to a more fundamental or general level, namely the existence of a plurality of speakers, which also constitutes an underlying condition of meaning and which any event of meaning—even the transmission of “ideal contents”—must make apparent in some way. In each case, we will see, a different conception of community—based alternatively on the identity of meaning or on the difference of speakers—takes the foreground.

Let us consider meaning in the first sense. To put meaning into circulation, to mean or communicate something, implies the ability to follow rules. Only rules can govern and guide a trans-subjective production of meaning. It does not matter whether these rules are given a priori or a posteriori, in any case they must be available for every speaker, who use them to engage in dialogue and in understanding. It is obvious that no communication would take place if the formation and the understanding of meaning did not follow rules, or if the rules of meaning were, so to speak, arbitrarily imposed in arbitrary circumstances by arbitrary wills. Even a speaker that deliberately seeks to let misunderstanding grow,

or systematically questions the sources and limits of meaning's normativity, counts upon a set of shared rules rendering her critical gesture possible, or at least meaningful. Had James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* not put into play different idiomatic systems when introducing the syntagm HE WAR, the questions raised by Derrida at the beginning of his *Ulysses Gramophone* ("How many languages can be lodged in a couple of words of Joyce?", "What is *one* word?")², would not make any sense. But they make sense, communication is achieved, so that an underlying set of rules for the production of meaning is operative and available to be checked by the reader.

Following this line of thought, a speaker counts as speaker only insofar as it is capable of participating in the trans-subjective process of meaning's production. She utters, conveys, creates, interprets meaning by following rules. She is a rational being, or a being-in-logos, capable of taking part in the historical transmission, transformation, clarification or perversion of such rules. She is recognized as a speaker only insofar as she is an instance or a passage of *logos*; that is, insofar as the community of speakers itself, its form-of-life, validates every time her particular forms of enabling or of letting meaning to circulate. Community here precedes the singularity of speakers, it is even formed on the basis of dispensing with all differences that may characterize speakers in their singular mode of producing meaning. Anything related to the singularity of the speaker's experience and to the singularity of the event of meaning's production, is by definition meaningless or at least irrelevant to communication. Therefore, it is deservedly overlooked by community. Only counts what the speaker is able to bring into speech, or what she succeeds to put into the form of an object that stands for more than one speaker and is graspable in more than one single occasion.

Community is thus the common formation of meaning. A member of the community is one who knows how to avoid deviation from the rules of this formation. She knows, therefore, how to escape the ostracism inflicted upon those who refuse or cannot follow such rules. As Kripke states while commenting on Wittgenstein, "one who is an incorrigible deviant in enough respects [from the rules of meaning] simply cannot participate in the life of the community and in communication" (KRIPKE, 1982, p. 92). Rule-following

² "Combien de langues peut-on loger en deux mots de Joyce (...)?"; or better: "Qu'est-ce qu'un mot?" (1987, p. 15)

is the criterium for community-membership because it defines community's mode of being and community's forms-of-life. Community is the normativity of meaning itself, i.e. the trans-subjective source of principles and guidelines enabling speakers to exist and perform as speakers.

In the Following, I will not be suggesting that there is a pre- or non-normative access to meaning, suitable to communicate the singular experience as such, as if meaning could be given through some supra- or non-linguistic, let alone mystic, intuitions. If any experience (even the liveliest and innermost experience) has any chance to be meaningful, then it must be brought into common or communicable chains of words, and, even if kept secretly treasured in the private realm of the person who has it, it must stand as an object of reference formed according to rules (potentially valid for more than one speaker, and in fact valid for the subject itself in more than one occasion). A pre- or non-normative access to meaning would be in fact a non-sense. However, it is not true that meaning is *only* formed normatively. That is, if I can say so, not all in meaning is meaningful. There are pre- or non-normative elements that are constitutive of the production of meaning and of its circulation and communication.

First of all, there is this fact that meaning is one-for-many or one-among-many. Without the existence of many (in the case that matters, many different singular speakers) nothing would count as one. Therefore, the event of communication is made possible not only by the meaning as common object, but also by the different singular subjects at stake. If it is helpful to find a parallel of this idea in the history of philosophy, I would refer to Kant's analyses of "merely subjective conditions" for communication ("knowledge") in the judgement of taste. These conditions do not concern the content of concepts ("meanings"). They concern the non-objective aspect of experience (Kant says: the "feeling"). In judgments of taste, I share not the particular content (the meaning) of the experience (that is, my feeling itself), but its singularity: *that* it is a singular experience, *that* it produces pleasure and that anyone at my place would experience the same pleasure even though I cannot provide or check the rules for its formation. The judgment of taste is simultaneously the consciousness of its own irreducible singularity and of the universality of such irreducible singularity. Of course, the subjective conditions of experience are universal, Kant says. But this does not mean that I have a universal experience of the subject through the experience of myself. It means that *my* singular experience is, first of all, an

experience, and second that the “singularity of experience” is also a law, or a condition, of experience.

In other words, an *irreducible* plurality of singularities is engaged in all objective experience. And also in the common adventure of meaning. Every time a meaning takes place, a singular experience also takes place. Meaning, in communication, is not given in itself (as a thing-in-itself), presented in absolute fashion, in some pure or full objectivity detached from the “merely subjective conditions” of experience. Meaning is every time supported by a network of subjective conditions, to which it makes reference indirectly—I say “indirectly” because that network is not a part of the referent of meaning. A meaning takes places or exists in the interaction of *many* different singularities. It exists *in* common (“*en commun*”). It is meaningful because *there are others* to which it is meaningful, others who, by themselves (*qua* singular beings), are not meaningful in the same sense as the object is. They co-appear with it or are summoned to appear with it.

Perhaps I should speak of “non-” instead of “pre-” normative meaning of community because I do not want in the least to suggest that we shall consider the “subjective conditions of experience” (that is, of meaning) as primitive or preparatory layers of a proper constitution of meaning as a full normative entity. The pre-normative conditions of meaning I am referring to co-determine the actual objective meaning. They act on the object *along with* its normative conditions. The idea follows Kant again in that there is no genetical transit between “merely subjective experience” and “objective experience.” But it goes further than Kant in that it recognizes that non-objective conditions take part in the constitution of the object of experience (of any objective meaning in general). In other words, it is not a matter of enlarging the concept of “normativity of meaning.” In fact, it is a matter of restricting it: not everything that is at stake in meaning is itself meaningful. Meaning is co-determined by non-normative conditions, and elements that are alien to meaning (meaningless elements!) take part, a determining part, in the production, the appearing, the circulation or the communication of meaning.

If meaning is co-determined by non-normative conditions, then we must characterize it as *incomplete*. We can recall Derrida’s analyses about the unsaturated nature of the context in *Signature Event Context* (in DERRIDA, 1982). Insofar as a meaning should be suitable for iteration, a rupture with the system of pragmatological elements (the context) that conditions its production and reception is not only possible, but also necessary. Thus,

meaning always entails a rest of indeterminacy. It is essentially, and not accidentally, equivocal, or unstable, or historical. As Derrida says in his introduction to Husserl's note about the origin of geometry, the univocity of meaning "is always relative, because it is always inscribed within a mobile system of relations and takes its source in an infinitely open project of acquisition" (DERRIDA, 1989, p. 104).

Incompleteness renders meaning *undecidable*, because meaning is doomed to be re-inscribed in contexts that are not foreseeable or controlled in advance. This is important because it tells that even the reception of meaning is a creative affaire, the matter of a decision that remains to be performed. There is no way to manipulate a meaning without (wittingly or unwittingly) deciding about contents that are not previously determined; consequently, without exposing it again to new unforeseen contexts of other decisions to come. The meaning of a meaning, even of the meaning that arrives to us from the past, is always to come. Meaning consists in the movement of its own indefinite (re)creation. There is no way to stop this movement, or this circulation, because it is due to a structural, inherent characteristic of meaning: its incompleteness and its undecidability. "No one can stop, finish, accomplish the meaning. Anytime one thinks to propose a particular signification (a particular referent), the movement of meaning removes it and sends it elsewhere." (2015, 86)

The incompleteness of meaning shall not be taken as a mere negative lack, the lack of some constituting lost part that could in principle be restored to complete meaning. The idea is precisely that meaning is positively constituted by non- or extra-meaningful elements, elements that are not to be replaced or sublated by some extended understanding of meaning. We could rephrase by saying that meaning *means* (circulates, moves) *by virtue of this lack of complete meaning*, or that meaning means while being *in want of meaning*, or *demanding meaning*. That demand is precisely what "means" in all meaning, without itself being reducible to any decidable meaning. It happens, therefore, as if some non-intentional *will* to mean were given along with meaning, or embedded in it, but deconstructing it. If I can play a little bit with Derrida's translation of meaning (*Bedeutung*) into French, I would say that the demand of meaning is a will, a *vouloir*, embedded in meaning, *vouloir-dire*, will-to-say, but a *vouloir* that undermines the *vouloir-dire* understood as intentional meaning. The will of meaning is what "removes," the meaningful

meanings, the senses and references that we may think to have reached during communication. It is what puts meaning again into circulation. The “circulation of meaning” is the persistent re-affirmation of the demand of meaning. A meaning never exists as a purely normative artefact. On the contrary, it lives off the deconstruction of meaning’s normativity.

Meaning bears always reference to the “other of meaning”—that is, to what makes meaning unstable, incomplete, and undecidable. This “other of meaning,” intrinsically involved in the production of meaning, is the figure under which Nancy understands *the* other—I mean, *one* other (someone, somebody, the singular being). The other is the one who introduces a demand of meaning. We cannot say that she is the other consciousness (because the production of meaning is grounded upon pre- or non-intentional elements, which are not accessible through empathy or mind cognition) and we cannot say that she is the other agent (because for meaning to occur, normativity must be suspended, or synopated: from the other we expect not only intentions and images of common possible worlds, but also pure freedom, unconditioned action, which are irreducible to moral or technical causalities).

The other is the will-to-mean (*demande, adresse*). The other comes with any event of meaning, but instead of grounding, supporting or completing it with present intentions, withdraws from it. (This withdrawal from meaning makes the circulation of meaning.) The more the other challenges the normal and traditional uses of meaning, and the more she in- or ex-scribes the non-signifying traces of her singularity, the more she will render present the pre-normative (and original) bonds of community. The other is by default or by definition a deviant from community, although such deviation is constitutive of the life of the community.

3. The relation between ontology and politics

I return now to the suggestion I made at the beginning of my text concerning the relationship between ontology and politics in Nancy’s philosophy of “community.” The suggestion was this: the development of the concept of community in both the ontological

and the political directions that Nancy's work took after the first publication of "The inoperative community" (if it is fair to speak about "different" directions) is paired with a particular conception of meaning.

As it is well known, Nancy's ontology develops following Heidegger's existential analytics of *Dasein* in *Being and Time*. According to the existential analytics, being is the movement of its own understanding in the act of being or existing (*Dasein*). Up to a certain point, being is nothing but pure understanding: the interpretation of beings, of history or of co-existence, the self-interpretation of the mortal and factual singularity, and the like. Being or existing (in the sense of *Dasein*) means being-in-the-circulation-of-meaning. "World," in the syntagm "being-in-the-world," means the open totality of such a circulation (cf. *Being and Time*, § 18: "Relevance and significance (*Bewandtnis und Bedeutsamkeit*); the worldliness of the world"). In Heidegger's work, the structure of meaning governs the ontological characterization of the concept of Being. Recall that *Being and Time* is explicitly concerned with the question about the *meaning* of Being. It is such precedence of the meaning of Being (the *Faktum* of language) what justifies Nancy's attempts to re-organize the Existential Analytic by giving priority to *Mitsein* over *Dasein*, and what orientates his later interpretation of the ontological difference and the transitivity of Being (NANCY, 2007). Community is not grounded upon a conception of what Being is nor is it a particular conception of Being itself. Community is the simple fact that Being is nothing *or* that it is only the circulation of meaning that accompanies the proliferation or dissemination of beings (ontological difference and transitivity of Being).

We should also say, on the other hand, that the concept of community does not arise from a general conception of the political. Understood as the pre-normative structure of meaning, it goes without saying that community cannot be reduced to social configurations of deliberative rationality. It is not, however, a question of taking "meaning" as a new conception or a new foundation of the political. The political pertains to the political—that is, to politics itself, and power. But meaning exhibits intrinsic limits of the political, limits that define the task of the political. They are the limits that politics encounters not only as a human power *vis-à-vis* supra-human powers (the divine, for instance),

but as human power *vis-à-vis* the unpredictable configurations of community itself—of the human itself, in a way.³

Community is the intractable demand of meaning that transcends, exceeds, disrupts in politics, or makes politics—that is, the shaping of the common—essentially incomplete (GARRIDO & MESSINA, 2015/2016). There is no way to overcome such an incompleteness through superior orders of meaning (onto-, meta-, ethico-, theo-, or bio-political orders). But, as I said, the limits that community inflict upon the political at the same time constitute the inner vocation of the political: to deal with the open, to be exposed and to respond to the demand of meaning, to let the other challenge the bases for social rationality and action. If politics is the art of giving form and order to common existence, then the “common existence” is never given under already known figures of the common. The problem with which politics begins and ends consists in making sense of community’s pre-normative meaning. “Politics must delimitate and preserve the access to what it cannot hold: the essential and infinite leak of meaning (*l’essentielle fuite infinie du sens*).”

Community’s self-understanding, that is, the question about what makes us to be “us,” does not precede and does not condition the event of the common. Under which conditions are we going to be “us”? (sc. what is our “good”?). That question, the political question, invariably comes from outside politics: from the event of unpredictable configurations of meaning, or from the irruption of unforeseen forms of our being-with-one-another. It comes from the pre-political *factum* of community, whose originarity in any case is by itself far from assuring any political and institutional existence (it is a “resistance” that somehow stands in antinomy with power). “Politics—the art of the polis, the technique and know-how of the city—emerges when being together—*our* being together, in sum *we*—is first to be made possible. Politics consist in making possible (*possibilisation*) a ‘we’ that may well be not possible” (2014).

Needless to say, the circulation of meaning does not raise as a new regulative idea leading a new re-organization of the political. The circulation of meaning is precisely the

³ “La politique est née dans la séparation entre elle-même et un autre ordre, qu’aujourd’hui notre esprit public ne vise plus comme divin, sacré ou inspiré mais qui n’en entretient pas moins sa séparation (encore une fois, à travers l’art, l’amour, la pensée...) – une séparation qu’on pourrait dire être celle de la vérité ou du sens, de ce sens du monde qui est hors du monde comme le dit Wittgenstein : le sens comme dehors ouvert au beau milieu du monde, au beau milieu de nous et entre nous comme notre commun partage. Ce sens qui ne conclut pas nos existences, qui ne les subsume pas sous une signification, mais qui tout simplement les ouvre à elles-mêmes c’est-à-dire aussi les unes aux autres” (NANCY, 2008).

experience of the impossibility to establish regulative Ideas as common horizons for the representation of our being in common.

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