

Reflexions on Mendes-Flohr's and Avnon's Interpretations of Buber's 'Living-Centre': Implications for the Gemeinde

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Abstract Martin Buber (1878–1965) is considered one of the twentieth century's greatest thinkers, contributing to the fields of philosophy, theology and education. After Buber's death the appreciation of his considerable legacy became rather muted, but was never completely forgotten. Recently, interest in Buber's thought has increased and a number of journal articles and books dealing with both general and specific aspects of his philosophy have appeared. However, the number of commentaries on the importance of his socio-political thought are still small in number, and it is arguable that only Mendes-Flohr and Avnon have provided significant discussions on this aspect of Buber's philosophy. This article adds to the debate in this area by referring to Buber's concept of the 'living-centre', and assesses the Mendes-Florian and Avnonian [*my terminology*] interpretations of this fundamental idea so as to establish which provides a more sustainable reading of Buber's ideas.

Keywords Buber · Mendes-Flohr · Avnon · Gemeinde · Builder

Introduction

In an interesting passage of *I and Thou* Buber (1970:94) argues that *a true community* [Die wahre Gemeinde] (i.e. a dialogical community) and consequently 'a community of communities':

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does not come into being because people have feelings for each other (though that is required, too), but rather on two accounts: *all of them have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to a single living center* [daß sie alle zu einer lebendigen Mitte in lebendig gegenseitiger Beziehung stehen], and they have to stand in a living reciprocal relationship to one another. The second event has its source in the first but is not immediately given with it. A living reciprocal relationship includes feelings but is not derived from them. *A community* [Die Gemeinde] is built upon a living, reciprocal relationship, *but the builder is the living, active center* [aber der Baumeister ist die lebendige wirkende Mitte] [my brackets and emphasis] (Buber 1970:94).¹

According to this passage of *I and Thou*, a true community emerges through i. the interactions between the members of the group and ii. the interactions between the members and ‘the living centre’ of the group. As such, the role played by the ‘living, active center’ [*lebedinge wirkende Mitte*] is a very important one and is the very foundation of the ‘community’ [*Gemeinde*].

However, when one peruses the literature on Buber’s socio-political theory two very distinct interpretations of the ‘centre’ emerge. Mendes-Flohr (1976) understands the ‘centre’ as a ‘situational revelation’ shared by all the members of a group - this same argument was reinstated years later by Mendes-Flohr (1985) demonstrating that he did not change his mind about this.² In contrast to this, Avnon (1993, 1998) understands the ‘centre’ as a real individual ‘the builder’ (i.e. der Baumeister)). As such, it is contended here that this situation has given rise to two interpretative schools of Buber’s socio-political thought, namely the Mendes-Flohrian and the Avnonian [*my terminology*]. Accordingly, this article sets out to explore their respective interpretations of the ‘living-centre’ and attempts to establish which provides a more sustainable interpretation of Buber’s ideas.

I and Thou: The Basic Words ‘I-Thou’ and ‘I-It’

Before dealing with those two interpretations of Buber’s socio-political thought, it is important to provide the reader with Buber’s understanding of the ‘basic words’ as they are the very cornerstone of his thought. In *I and Thou*, which was first published in 1923, Buber argues that human beings:

- i. are relational beings;
- ii. are always in a relation with either other human beings, or the world, or God;

¹ NB. This is the Kauffman translation. The Smith translation reads: The true community does not arise through peoples having feelings for one another (though indeed not without it), but through first, their taking their stand in living mutual relation with a living Centre, and, second, their being in living mutual relation with one another. The second has its source in the first, but is not given when the first alone is given. Living mutual relation includes feelings but does not originate with them. The community is built up out of the living mutual relation, but the builder is the living, effective Centre. (cf. Buber 1958:45)

² It is interesting to note that Susser (1981) offered this same reading, but in a more detailed manner and specific framework.

- iii. possess a two-fold attitude towards other human beings, the world, or God, which is indicated by the *basic words* I-It (*Ich-Es*) and I-Thou (*Ich-Du*).³

The *basic words* are a “linguistic construct created by Buber as a way of pointing to the quality of the experience that this *combination of words* seeks to connote” (Avnon 1998:39) [*my emphasis*], so that I-It and I-Thou are read as ‘unities’ indicating one’s state of Being and attitude towards the *Other*, the *World* and *God*. This means that there is no *I* relating to a *Thou* or to an *It*; rather, what exists is a kind of relation encapsulated by the unification of these words. Avnon (1998:40) comments insightfully that “one may summarize this point by suggesting that the difference between the I-You and the I-It relation to being is embedded in the hyphen”. The hyphen of I-Thou indicates the kind of relation that is inclusive to the *Other* whilst the hyphen of the I-It points to the sort of relation that is not inclusive to the *Other*, that in fact separates the *Other*. Let me now explain these *basic words* in further detail.

The I-Thou relation is an *inclusive* reality between individuals. Buber argues that the I-Thou relation lacks structure and content because infinity and universality are at the basis of the relation. This is so because when a human being ‘encounters’ another through this mode of Being, then an infinite number of meaningful and dynamic situations may take place in that which Buber calls ‘the Between’. Thus, it is important to note that any sort of preconception, expectation, or systematisation about the *Other* prevents the I-Thou relation from arising (cf. Theunissen 1984: 274–275; Olsen 2004: 17) because they work as a ‘veil’ or a barrier to being *inclusive* towards the *Other*. For those familiar with the Jewish concept of *Teshuvah* (Literally *Return* in Hebrew; but widely translated as *Repentance*), the I-Thou relations means *turning towards the Other with the whole openness of one’s Being*, just as when one *turns towards God* on Yom Kippur. When this happens between two human beings, both of them need to *turn towards the Other*; when this happens between a human being and God, only the human being needs to *turn towards God*, because God is always ready to respond. It is this ‘turning towards the *Other*’ that enables an *inclusive* reality to emerge, allowing the *Other* to present himself or herself to one with the fullness of his or her being. Despite the fact that it is difficult to characterise this kind of relation, Buber argues that it is real and perceivable, and examples of the I-Thou relation in our day-to-day life are those of: two lovers, two friends, a teacher and a student.

Whilst in the I-Thou relation two beings are *inclusive* to each other, in the I-It relation entities fail to do so. Instead, in the I-It relation a being confronts another being, objectifies it, and in doing so *separates* itself from the *Other*, ‘turning away from the

³ It is important to draw attention to the German word *Du*, which is present in the original German title as well as in the foundational concept *Ich-Du*. Walter Kauffman in his important and modern translation of the work points out that *Du* is the German personal pronoun one uses to address friends or family, people with whom one has a close relationship. *Du* is the informal personal pronoun and this is in contrast with *Sie* which is the personal pronoun used to address people one is not familiar with or that one does not have a close relationship or that is used as a sign of respect (e.g. to elders). This distinction is present in many languages (e.g. French: Tu and Vous); however, it has been lost in English. The English archaic personal *Thou*, which was the equivalent of *Du*, has lost its informal connotation in modern times, and as such it does not capture the idea of informality present in Buber’s text. Perhaps, *Du* is better translated in English as *you*, which is something Kauffman actually does in his translation—he only kept the original *Thou* of the title (cf. Buber 1970). That said, I have opted to keep *Thou* throughout the text so to follow the conventional terminology of the secondary literature.

Other'. This is in direct contrast with I-Thou relations because the "'I' of I-It relations indicates a separation of self from what it encounters" and "[b]y emphasising difference, the 'I' of I-It experiences a sensation of apparent singularity - of being alive by virtue of being unique; of being unique by accentuating difference; of being different as a welcome separation from the other present in the situation; of having a psychological distance ('I') that gives rise to a sense of being special in opposition to what is" (Avnon 1998:39). Thus, when one engages in I-It relations one separates oneself from the Other and gains a sense of being different, special and arguably, superior at the same time.

Buber (2004:3) himself characterised these *basic words* succinctly, and in accordance to what I have just said about them, as follows:

The primary word *I-Thou* can only be spoken with the whole being. The primary word *I-It* can never be spoken with the whole being.

Buber understood that human existence consists of an oscillation between I-Thou and I-It relations and that the I-Thou experiences are rather few and far between. However, if I-It relations become too dominant to the point of suppressing I-Thou relations, this becomes problematic as it is as if 'one diminishes oneself as a human being' because I-Thou relations are a fundamental part of the human condition. It is also important to emphasise that Buber rejects any sort of sharp dualism between the I-Thou and I-It relation. That is, for Buber there is always an *inter-play between* the I-Thou and the I-It rather than an *either-or* relation between these foundational concepts. The I-Thou relation will always slip into an I-It relation because it is too intense, but the I-It relation has always the potential of becoming an I-Thou relation. I draw the reader's attention to the fact that this oscillation is very significant for it is the source of transformation, because through every I-Thou encounter, the I is transformed and this affects the I's outlook of I-It relations and of future I-Thou encounters. Putnam (2008: 67) notes that "the idea is that if one achieves that mode of being in the world, however briefly ... then ideally, that mode of being ... will *transform* one's life even when one is back in the 'It world'."

Another aspect of Buber's theory is that '[i]n each Thou we address the eternal Thou' (Buber 1970:14). This means that for him allowing I-Thou relations to arise, *turning towards the Other*, represents an encounter with the eternal Thou. This may sound strange and difficult to grasp until we tap into the Hasidic⁴ influences on Buber's thought. Buber acknowledges this in *Between Man and Man*. I quote Buber (1969:224):

Since 1900 I had first been under the influence of German mysticism from Meister Eckhart to Angelus Silesius, according to which primal ground of Being, the nameless, impersonal Godhead, comes to birth in the human soul; then I had been under the influence of the later Kabbala and of Hasidism, according to

⁴ Hasidism is a popular religious movement that emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century in Eastern Europe. During the nineteenth and twentieth century it spread to other regions, notably Palestine and the United States. It has a focus on communal life and charismatic leadership as well as on 'ecstasy', 'mass enthusiasm', and close-knit group cohesion (cf. Hasidism 2007).

which man has the power to unite the God who is over the world with his shekinah dwelling in the world.

Buber (1988a, b) also acknowledged this in his “My Way to Hassidism”, and on commenting on this aspect of Buber’s thought Wodehouse (1945:29) writes:

The glory of God, said the Chassists, was poured out in the beginning over weak vessels that broke and could not hold it; but every fragment still retains a spark of that divinity, and the Presence of God goes into exile with these sparks, and man co-operates with it to bring them back into manifestation and into reunion with the one Light from which they came.

Hasidism understands that all genuine relations converge into the Eternal; whenever human beings genuinely relate to one another, and to other entities, they relate to God – it is this aspect of Hasidism that greatly influenced Buber. This turns I-Thou relations into the key to a religious life as establishing I-Thou relations in our daily lives brings sanctity to daily tasks and routine (cf. Silberstein 1989:210). Hence, for Buber every time we allow I-Thou relations to arise, every time we address the Other as a Thou, we cease to be alone because we allow the ‘spark’ of the Eternal that resides in us to connect with the ‘spark’ of the Eternal that is in the Other.

This characterisation of Buber’s understanding of the *basic words*, I-Thou and I-It, will suffice as a grounding for my assessment of the Mendes-Flohrian’s and Avnonian’s interpretations of Buber’s socio-political thought, and it is to these that I now turn my attention.

Mendes-Flohrian Interpretation

In his seminal article “Martin Buber’s Concept of the Center and Social Renewal”, Mendes-Flohr (1976:11–26) argues that Buber’s concept of the ‘centre’ has caused a great deal of confusion amongst Buber’s scholars, as it has been understood in a number of different ways, such as “as a true, charismatic leader; as ‘the sphere of ultimate values’; as a metaphysical sensation that accompanies the effort to build a just, organic community; as a transcendent ‘Central Thou’ shared by numerous individuals, who thus...have a ‘communality’” - Silberstein (1989:177) and Kramer (2003:81–82) also reported that there are many interpretations of the ‘centre’. However, Mendes-Flohr argues further that these interpretations are inadequate, and proposes an alternative based on some textual evidence of Buber’s writings, but without much analysis of the previously mentioned alternatives.

According to Mendes-Flohr (1976:19), for Buber “a *Gemeinde*...is founded when a host of men encounter and realize a common revelation, a Thou which addresses them collectively”. That is, a *Gemeinde* is centred on “a situational revelation”, a connection with the eternal Thou - this same argument was reinstated almost a decade after by Mendes-Flohr (1985) in an article entitled “Prophetic Politics and Metasociology”. His proposition is based on a passage from Buber’s essay “Wie kann Gemeinschaft werden?” (i.e. How can Geimenschaft evolve?), which was written in 1930 and I quote Buber (1938:54; cited in Mendes-Flohr 1976:19):

When individuals really have something to do with one another, when they share an experience and together existentially respond to that experience - that is, when men have a living centre about which they are constellated - then *Gemeinschaft* is established between them.

It is the 'centre', now understood as the 'situational revelation' representing a direct connection to the eternal Thou, that brings an all encompassing 'inclusive-ness' to the lives of the members of a given group; that is, it is the 'revelation' that enables a group of individuals to establish I-Thou relations between and among themselves, and thus give rise to a *Gemeinde*. Mendes-Flohr (1976:19) notes that Buber instantiates this in "What is Man?", his inaugural address as Professor of Social Philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1938, by referring to the following case:

The close union which is formed for a few days among the genuine disciples and fellow workers of a movement when an important leader dies. All impediments and difficulties between them are set aside, and a strange fruitfulness, or at all events incandescence, of their life with one another is established. Another transient form is seen when, in face of a catastrophe which appears inevitable, the really heroic element of a community gathers together within itself, withdraws from all idle talk and fuss, but in it each is open to the others and they anticipate, in a brief common life, the binding power of a common death. (Buber 2004:209)

According to Mendes-Flohr, it is evident in this passage that a *Gemeinde* is founded by a 'situational revelation' (be it the death of a leader, or the heroic urge in the face of catastrophe), which acts as the 'centre' and enables I-Thou relations to arise between the members of a group of individuals. Kramer (2003:81) partakes in this understanding and refers to a passage from *I and Thou* where Buber (1970:95) says:

True public and true personal life are forms of *association* [Verbundenheit]. For them to originate and endure, feelings are required as a changing content, and institutions, are required as a constant form; but even the combination of both still does not create human life which is created only by a third element: the central presence of the You, or rather, to speak more truthfully, the central You that is received in the present [my emphasis and brackets].⁵

The word translated by Kauffman as 'association' (*Verbundenheit*) is a key concept in Buber's writings and it might better be translated as a 'deep bonding'. According to Kramer (2003:81) what gives rise to a *Gemeinde* is the presence of the central *Thou*, its 'revelation', "a spirit of common mutuality specific to each group's way of bonding deeply...and [t]his bonding both generates and is generated by community members". The above quoted passage is also interesting because Buber states that the 'feelings' of mutuality between the members of the group are something that arise

⁵ This is the Kaufmann translation. The Smith translation reads: "True public and true personal life are two forms of connexion. In that they come into being and endure, feelings (the changing content) and institutions (the constant form) are necessary; but put together they do not create human life: this is done by the third, the central presence of the *Thou*, or rather, more truly stated, by the central *Thou* that has been received in the present. (cf. Buber 1958: 46)"

within the Gemeinde and are not the basis for its formation; that is, Buber rejects ‘feelings’ as the foundation stone for the Gemeinde. This puts Buber in direct opposition to Max Weber (1947:136), who says explicitly in his *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* that:

A social relationship will be called ‘communal’ if and so far as orientation of social action - whether in the individual case, on the average, or in the pure type - is based on a subjective *feeling* of the parties, whether affectual or traditional, that they belong together. A social relationship will, on the other hand, be called ‘associative’ if and in so far as the orientation of social action within it rests on a rationally motivated adjustment of interests or a similarly motivated agreement, whether the basis of rational judgement be absolute values or reasons of expediency. [my emphasis]

However, there appears to be a problem with Buber’s views. As Mendes-Flohr (1976:20) notes the Gemeinde is inevitably faced with discontinuity because it will only last for as long as the ‘situational revelation’ remains *influential* and *relevant*. This means that those who experience the Gemeinde will endeavour to make it last for as long as possible because I-Thou relations are something so powerful and essential to the human condition. As such a group’s relation to the ‘centre’, to the enabling I-Thou ‘situational revelation’, must be continuously renewed; otherwise, the relations between the members of the group will decay into I-It relations and the Gemeinde will cease to exist (cf. also Silberstein 1989:177). Buber (1949:134) was aware of this as he says in *Paths in Utopia* that “[t]he realization of community, like the realization of any idea, cannot occur once and for all time: always it must be the moment’s answer to the moment’s question, and nothing more”. And it is important to draw attention here to the fact that this problem is connected to the ‘continuation’ of the Gemeinde and not to its ‘foundation’, because it only arises once the Gemeinde has been established.

Mendes-Flohr (1976:19) argues that it is as a consequence of this ‘continuation problem’ that institutional religion emerges and the cult of God as an *object* serves “to supplement the foundation acts” of the Gemeinde. Nevertheless, there is always an ever increasing danger that religion and cult will eventually “weaken one’s attentiveness to the address of the eternal Thou” (Mendes-Flohr 1976:20). If this happens, then it causes the decay of I-Thou relations between the members of the group, turning their relations into I-It ones, and the dissolution of the Gemeinde becomes inevitable. Therefore, and as I mentioned previously, the ‘centre’ must be reinforced and renewed *continuously* if the Gemeinde is to survive, and the dangers of it dissolving is a constant one - this is an *innate* characteristic of the Gemeinde.

In his book, *Existence and Utopia: The Social and Political Thought of Martin Buber*, Susser (1981) provides a similar understanding of the ‘centre’. Susser (1981:52) says:

This ‘centre’, community’s transcendental archetype, is the generating point of contact, the binding joint that permits the movement of individuals toward each other. Metaphorically speaking, each individual is a spoke off the radiating ‘centre’. The ‘centre’ binds individuals together in the light of a commonly conceived purpose much as an audience which witnesses a great theatrical event

is forged into a unity. As both archetype and common catalyst, the ‘centre’ is irreplaceable; without it community degenerates into an uninspired aggregation.

Thus, Susser understands the ‘centre’ as a ‘situational revelation’; however, unlike Mendes-Flohr who uses more ‘tangible’ examples of Gemeinde in his writings, Susser defends this point within a more political paradigm and refers specifically to the formation of the Jewish Nation. I quote Susser (1981:145):

Nationhood came to the Jews when, through the revelation at Sinai, they were forged into a community of faith; when they saw themselves united in the light of a common ‘center’. Rising above simple self-consciousness, Israel became the carrier of a historic mission; it stood charged with closeness, that is, the responsibility to establish the ‘Kingdom of God’ on Earth, to transform a community of faith into a community of deeds.

In this case the ‘centre’, that ‘situational revelation’, is the ‘idea’ that the Jewish people have the mission of ‘being a light unto the Nations’. But contrary to Mendes-Flohr’s interpretation which seems to suggest that the Gemeinde necessitates some sort of closeness between the member of the group so that I-Thou relations are put in force (i.e. “The close union which is formed for a few days among the genuine disciples and fellow workers of a movement when an important leader dies” (Buber 2004:209, cited in Mendes-Flohr 1976:19)), Susser’s detailed account on the formation of Jewish Nationhood does not necessitate that, and life in the Diaspora is good evidence of this. As Silberstein (1989:179) notes:

For Buber, community is less a matter of intimacy than of openness. It is possible to speak of community even if people are not continually together. Just as a love relationship does not require constant togetherness, neither does community. So long as people “have mutual access to one another and are ready for one another” (Buber, *Paths of Utopia*, 145), the basis for a community exists.

Nevertheless, the core problem with this understanding of the ‘centre’ as a ‘situational revelation’, which was first identified a few years earlier by Mendes-Flohr, is that a Gemeinde is threatened by an *innate* inherent discontinuity if the ‘situational revelation’ is not continuously reinforced and renewed. And in the specific case of the Jewish Nation, Susser understands that the emergence of Zionism represents an instance of the reinforcement and renewal of the ‘revelation’, sustaining the Gemeinde. Susser (1981:147) says:

The main threat lives in the ever-present seductive power of ‘normalization’, the rejection of chosenness - becoming, as the Israelites said to Samuel ‘like all other nations’. While the precariousness and vulnerability of Jewish life in the Diaspora impelled many Jews to seek security through shedding their uniqueness, so long as Israel lived as a ‘ghost people’, severed from its land, the danger of shirking uniqueness was an individual phenomenon limited to outright rejection of Jewishness. The founding of the State of Israel has set the matter into a new - but still very old and biblical - perspective... For Buber, the critical question of Zionism is: will

Israel shoulder its chosenness, seeking its security precisely in its unique responsibilities, or shall it fall victim to the enticements of ‘normalization’ and following the road of least resistance, *turn its face on* historical duty. [my emphasis]

Thus, Susser agrees with Mendes-Flohr, and it becomes very apparent that the reinforcement and renewal of the ‘situational revelation’ must be a constant if the Gemeinde is to survive. If this does not happen, then the members of the Gemeinde might cease to engage in I-Thou relations, *to turn towards the Other*, and start relating to each other through I-It relations, *turning their faces on the Other*. Susser’s understanding of Zionism as the renovation and reinforcement of the original ‘revelation’ forming Jewish Gemeinde renders a very spiritual tinge to the movement, and this is in agreement with Buber’s very early engagement with Zionism since he continuously advocated for a ‘cultural or spiritual renewal’ of the Jewish community (cf. Agassi 2006:237–245; Biale 1982:21). However, Susser’s argument appears to be also at odds with more practical accounts of the movement, especially that of Theodor Herzl, the founder of Modern Zionism with whom Buber had some serious disagreements, who understood that the Jew was not safe in his stateless condition, and that the establishment of Israel was an urgent and necessary requirement for the Jewish Gemeinde (and I would argue that in the face of *Auschwitz*, as Buber often referred to the Holocaust, Herzl seemed to have been right) (cf. Herzl 1896; 1946).

The Mendes-Flohrian reading of the ‘centre’ as a ‘situational revelation’ has been very influential (and it is mirrored in Susser’s), and it is based on textual evidence of some of Buber’s writings, such as his essays “Wie kann Gemeinschaft werden?” (1930; 1933) and “What is Man?” (1938); however, it completely disregards that important passage of *I and Thou*, in which Buber (1970:94) says emphatically that “[a] community [Die Gemeinde] is built upon a living, reciprocal relationship, *but the builder is the living, active center* [aber der Baumeister ist die lebendige wirkende Mitte]”. That is, there is no mention of *the builder* [der Baumeister] in this interpretation, and this is rather puzzling. Let me now deal with the Avnonian interpretation which is at odds with the Mendes-Flohrian in this respect.

The Avnonian Interpretation

In his article “The ‘Living Centre’ of Martin Buber’s Political Theory” (1993) and in his book *Martin Buber: The Hidden Dialogue* (Avnon 1998), Avnon proposes an understanding of Buber’s Gemeinde that is very much centred around the concept of ‘the builder’ [der Baumeister].

The point made by Avnon is that that crucial passage of *I and Thou* mentioning ‘the builder’ clearly states that the members of a Gemeinde aspire to enter into I-Thou relations with each Other, *to turn towards the Other*, but that this is only possible and necessarily dependent on prior social conditions created by the emergence of a ‘builder’ who responds to the challenge of the hour. This might seem a minor point, but it is a crucial one. As Avnon (1993:60) says:

The living centers of community, the builders of community, thus generate in the social world that quality of relation that constitutes ‘the between’.

It is ‘the builder’ that prepares the social framework and the members of the group to receive the ‘situational revelation’, and as such ‘the builder’ is ‘the centre’, not the ‘situational revelation’ as the Mendes-Flohrian interpretation would have. As Avnon (1998:156) says:

A community may be formed in a moment of revelation, yet the decisive element in creating that moment is the appropriate communal context established by virtue of the efforts of the ones at its center...“the meaning of the revelation is that it is to be prepared”, prepared by living persons, not by transcendent deities.

Avnon’s argument is centred around the idea that the Gemeinde is something that is developed in the context of lived relationships and ‘in reality’. And as such, it is arguable that Buber was not just characterising ‘the ideal Gemeinde’ in his writings, something we should aspire to achieve, but provided us with a characterisation of the Gemeinde as it exists in the world. This makes sense given that there is much supporting evidence from Buber’s writings where he describes “his own ‘philosophizing’ as ‘essentially anthropological’” (Schilpp (1967:693) cited in Murphy 1988:41; cf. Silberstein 1989:169).

Buber’s ‘anthropological philosophy’ represents a reaction to a particular trend in Western philosophy. He complained that, in the West, philosophy (with the exceptions of the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, Saint Augustine, Pascal and existentialist philosophers) failed to formulate and tackle fundamental questions, preferring to focus on particular philosophical problems and becoming increasingly detached from the human being and human experience. For Buber, any philosophical enquiry has to deal with issues such as: ‘what is the human being?’ and ‘how does the human being relate to the world?’; and thus, *Buber was very concerned in understanding the human condition and its relation to reality*, and this is what is, or should be, fundamental for philosophy. This ‘anthropological philosophical approach’ places Buber within the Existentialist philosophical school alongside the likes of Kierkegaard and Sartre (cf. Murphy 1988:41–63). I contend here that Buber’s criticism of Western philosophy are perhaps more applicable to 20th century philosophy, and particularly to the Anglo-American tradition of analytic philosophy, rather than to the majority of philosophers practicing in the West in modern times. Aquinas, Spinoza, Kant and others are figures that spring to mind as sharing Buber’s concern for the relation of *the human condition and its relation to reality*.

Hence, Avnon (1993, 1998) maintains that the Gemeinde is created by the “living, active centre” ‘the builder’ [der Baumeister], who acts as a catalyst for I-Thou relations to arise between himself and the group, and among the members of the group. It is ‘the builder’ that prepares the social framework and the members of the group to receive the ‘situational revelation’ that enables them to become a Gemeinde. Therefore, ‘the builder’ is at the very ‘centre’ of the process giving rise to the Gemeinde according to the Avnonian reading.

Comparisons Between the Mendes-Flohrian and Avnonian Interpretations

Let me draw these two interpretations of Buber’s ‘living, active centre’ together so that we can compare them and establish which of these will offer us a more sustainable interpretation of Buber’s thought.

First, I would maintain that the Avnonian reading seems to be on a stronger ground than the Mendes-Flohrian interpretation, because the latter seems to suggest that the Gemeinde simply comes into being without social preparations, rendering it dissociated from ‘reality’. This is to say that the Mendes-Flohrian interpretation of the ‘centre’ as a ‘situational revelation’ leads “us to conclude that the origin of true community [Gemeinde] is essentially an act of grace rather than the product of human efforts” [my brackets] (Avnon 1998:156). This criticism clearly applies to Mendes-Flohr’s argument. For instance, when Mendes-Flohr (1976:19) quotes from Buber’s “What is Man?” (“The close union which is formed for a few days among the genuine disciples and fellow workers of a movement when an important leader dies”) the suggestion is that the death of the leader, the loss his death causes, is the ‘situational revelation’ bringing people together into a Gemeinde, even if it happens just for a few days. Mendes-Flohr seems to forget that, in this case, the leader was someone ‘real’, who in one way or another implemented the social framework that made it possible for I-Thou relations to arise between himself and the members of the group, and among themselves, so that the Gemeinde could emerge. Likewise, when Susser (1981:145) refers to the case of the formation of Jewish Nationhood and that the ‘situational revelation’ is that they received the ‘idea’ of being ‘a light unto the Nations’, he ignores completely that a particular social framework had to be in place for this to happen; that is, if Moses had not done all his deeds, freed the Jews from slavery in Egypt, taken his people through the wilderness and towards Canaan, leading to his receiving the tablets of the Law at Mount Sinai, then the ‘situational revelation’ that the Jews are ‘a light unto the Nations’ would not have occurred. Moses is ‘the builder’ that enabled I-Thou relations to arise between himself and the group as well as among the group, giving rise to the Gemeinde, the Jewish Nation. The crucial point is that there has to be a ‘builder’ in first place for the ‘situational revelation’ to happen, consequently leading to the rise of the Gemeinde.

The importance of ‘the builder’ becomes even more evident if we refer to Buber’s socio-political project, which aimed at substituting the modern state and its institutions, so characterised by relationships based on power and domination, with a global system of a ‘community of communities’, “a *communitas communitatum* - a union of communities within which the proper autonomous life of each community can unfold...[thus] not based on the exploitation of human conflicts...[but on] a mutual dependence of increasingly free and independent individuals...[forming] a confederation of commonwealths all of which are in turn based on ‘the actual and communal life of big and little groups living and working together’” (Friedman 2002:249–250; 252) (*my brackets*). This project would be implemented in three stages: i. the establishment of Gemeinden (true communities) based on a new social framework; ii. the implementation of a *communitas communitatum* (commonwealth of communities) bound together by trust and aware of the eternal Thou (God); iii. this new global order becomes conducive and encourages I-Thou relations between communities and the members of these communities (cf. Avnon 1993:60–61). The Mendes-Flohrian understanding of Buber’s socio-political thought only deals partially with stages ii. and iii., but disregards completely stage i. That is, the ‘situational revelation’, the connection to the eternal Thou (God), bonds individuals together in trust and enables I-Thou relations to arise between them, and this is stage ii. of Buber’s project, possibly leading to stage iii. However, stage i. (i.e. the social framework forged by

‘the builder’), so that stages ii. and iii. could happen appears to be missing. Furthermore, by focusing on more ‘tangible’ examples of Gemeinde, Mendes-Flohr seems to play down the ambitiousness of Buber’s project, which envisaged a ‘new global order’ founded on ‘dialogue’ rather than on ‘power and domination’, and in this respect Susser and Avnon seem to be on stronger foundations.

Another possible criticism of the Mendes-Florian interpretation, if one accepts that it is misguided in ignoring the importance of ‘the builder’ in Buber’s thought, is that it asserts that the ‘situational revelation’ needs to be constantly renewed and reinforced. This appears to miss the target and I argue that it is not the ‘situational revelation’ that needs constant renewal and reinforcement, but rather ‘the builder’ for ‘the builder’ is the ‘centre’ of the Gemeinde. This means that as long as there are I-Thou relations between the members of a group, and between themselves and ‘the builder’, ‘the centre’, then one can speak of Gemeinde; however, when these I-Thou relations decay and become I-It ones, the Gemeinde ceases to exist. As Buber (1970:163) says:

The moments of supreme encounter are no mere flashes of lighting in the dark, but like a rising moon in a clear starry night. And thus the genuine guarantee of spatial constancy consists in this that men’s relations to their true You, being the radii that leads from all I-points to the center, create a circle. Not the periphery, not the community comes first, but the radii, the common relation to the center. That alone assures the genuine existence of a community.⁶

This leads me to the importance of I-Thou relations for the Gemeinde. This can be clearly illustrated by referring to Elias Canetti’s understanding of the masses and contrasting it to Buber’s views on Gemeinde. In his book of memoirs, *The Torch in My Ear*, Canetti (1982: 251) says:

Here [in Vienna], one and for all, I had experienced something that I later called an open crowd. I had witnessed its formation: the confluence of people from all parts of the city, in long, steadfast, undeflectable processions, their direction set by the position of the building that bore the name *Justice*, yet embodied injustice because of miscarriage of justice. I had come to see that a crowd has to fall apart, and I had seen it fearing its disintegration; I had watched it actually see itself in the fire it lit, hindering its disintegration so long as this fire burned. It warded off any attempt at putting out the fire; its own longevity depended on that of the fire. It was scattered, driven away, and sent fleeing by attacks; yet even though wounded, injured, and dead people lay before it on the streets, even though the crowd had no weapons of its own, it gathered again, for the fire was still burning, and the glow of the flames illuminated the sky over the squares and streets. I saw that a crowd can flee without panicking; the mass

⁶ This is the Kauffman translation. The Smith translation reads: “The moments of supreme meeting are then not flashes in darkness but like the rising moon in a clear starlit night. Thus, too, the authentic assurance of constancy in space consists of the fact that men’s relations with their true Thou, the radial lines proceed from all the points of the I to the Centre, form a circle. It is not the periphery, the community, that comes first, but the radii, the common quality of relation with the Centre. This alone guarantees the authentic existence of the community. (cf. Buber 1958:115)

flight and panic are distinguishable. So long as the fleeing crowd does not disintegrate into individuals worried only about themselves, about their own persons, then the crowd still exists, although fleeing; and when the crowd stops fleeing, it can turn and attack. [my brackets]⁷

According to Canetti, we, as human beings, whether primitive or civilised, fear and have a natural revulsion to being touched by the unknown *Other*; however, when we become absorbed in the masses we lose this primal fear, want the experience of collective security to continue; and will do everything to stop the dissolution of the crowd; we desire to continue as part of this *apotheosis* (cf. Canetti 1984; Morgan and Guilherme 2013:46–47). On the one hand, it is arguable that the mass can never be a *Gemeinde* because no *I-Thou* relations are in place between the members of the group. That is, those individuals forming the crowd relate to each other through *I-It* relations because they pre-conceive the *Other* as someone like ‘myself’, desiring the same thing, fighting for the same cause, with the same political outlook. As such, it is arguable that Buber would maintain that the crowd can never be a *Gemeinde*. However, I would challenge this and assert that the crowd can never be, *as it is*, a *Gemeinde*; and this means that given the right conditions it *could* indeed develop into a *Gemeinde*. That is, just as *I-It* relations have the potential to become *I-Thou* ones, the *crowd* has the potential to become a *Gemeinde* giving the right conditions. According to the Mendes-Flohrian interpretation of ‘the centre’ the crowd needs to receive a ‘situational revelation’, which would enable the members of the group to form a *Gemeinde*; according to the Avnonian interpretation of ‘the centre’, ‘a builder’ needs to appear and prepare the ground, the social framework and the members of the group, to receive the ‘revelation’, so that they can form a *Gemeinde*. And in the light of both, I would suggest that the Avnonian interpretation seems to be more reasonable given that usually the emergence of the crowd, whether on the streets or through the new phenomenon of social media, relies on ‘a first mover’ (i.e. an individual or a group) who galvanise individuals to protest and demand.

Finally and crucially, it is arguable that the Mendes-Flohrian interpretation makes a mistake by converging the ‘eternal *Thou*’ and the ‘central *Thou*’; that is, it understands it as one and the same entity. However, as Kramer (2003:94) notes: “Although for Buber, the ‘eternal *Thou*’ happens through the ‘central *Thou*’, the two *Thous* are not to be equated. Binding particular *I-Thou* relationships together, the ‘central *Thou*’ is uniquely present in each community. The ‘eternal *Thou*’, on the other hand, is everywhere eternally present”. That is, ‘the builder’ is the ‘central *Thou*’ of the *Gemeinde*, enabling *I-Thou* relations between himself and the members of the community, as well as among the group; ‘the builder’ is the ‘deep bond’ between and among those individuals forming a *Gemeinde*. However, ‘the builder’ is not the ‘eternal *Thou*’, God, who is present everywhere and manifested in all *I-Thou* relations.

⁷ This passage refers to the July Revolt of 1927, which was a clash between Social Democrats and an alliance of industrialists and the Roman Catholic Church. 84 demonstrators and 4 policemen died and some 600 individuals were injured. These protests led to the fall of the right-wing government of Chancellor Ignaz Seipel.

The Builders and the Gemeinde

This leads me to pose the question: *Who* are ‘the builders’, the ‘centres’ of the Gemeinde? The Mendes-Flohr interpretation does not refer to ‘the builder’ and makes use of very tangible and day-to-day situations, such as the death of a leader, to expound its argument that the ‘centre’ is a ‘situational revelation’; as such, it is unhelpful to us in trying to answer this question. In contrast to this is Avnon (1998:88–94) who refers to one of Buber’s theological essays, namely “Leadership in the Bible”, to provide a characterisation about and discussion on the nature of ‘the builder’.

Avnon (1998:90) notes that in “Leadership in the Bible”, Buber (1978) identifies five kinds of leadership: “patriarch (*av*), leader (*manhig*), judge (*shofet*), king (*melech*), and prophet (*navi*)”. The *patriarch* (e.g. Abraham) sustains a direct and close relation with the eternal Thou, and has been assigned the task of creating a people. The *leader* (e.g. Moses) is ascribed with the mission of founding a nation, a historical entity. The *judge* (e.g. Deborah) emerges as a response to chaotic times, in which there is tensions concerning the development of the people into a nation, and between the people and its relation to the ‘eternal Thou’; that is, the members of the group feel disconnect to both the ‘situational revelation’ and to the eternal Thou, and a new ‘builder’ needs to appear to renew these. It is interesting to note here that Walzer (1988:75; cited in Avnon 1998:238–239) acknowledges Buber’s insight distinguishing peoples (and the Patriarch), nations (and the Leader) and nationalisms (and the Judge) when he says: “the first is a matter of common experience, ‘a unity of faith’; the second a collective awareness of this unity; the third a heightened or ‘overemphasized’ awareness in the face of division or oppression. Peoplehood is an impulse, nationality an idea, nationalism a program”. The fourth kind of leader is the *king*, who emerges from an urge in the people to be governed historically. However, this gives rise to a problematic situation: on the one hand the *king* is the *mashiach* (the messiah, the anointed one) and as such he establishes a direct connection between the people and the eternal one; but on the other hand kingship implies “hereditary succession, with no guarantees that the successors will be worthy of the original anointment” (Avnon 1998:92). The fifth category of leadership, the *prophet*, arises from the troubles caused by kingship and it challenges both those who are in office and the structures of power that support them.

Prima facie, this analysis of leadership might appear irrelevant for our modern times, and of pure theological interest; however, it is arguable that this is not the case. Buber concludes his analysis on Bible leadership by arguing that those biblical leaders “are the foreshadowings of the dialogical person, of the person who commits his whole being to Elohim’s dialogue with the world, and who stands firm throughout this dialogue” (Buber 1978:148 cited in Avnon 1998:94). From this passage I understand and argue that all those different kinds of leadership are in fact only facets of ‘the builder’, of the dialogical leader, the ‘centre’ of the Gemeinde. The effect all those different kinds of leaders had was to enable I-Thou relations between themselves and the people, and among the people; and in doing so, ‘the builder’ connected the Gemeinde to the eternal Thou through the ‘situational revelation’, the demands of the hour required. In this respect, this characterisation is a very useful one, and it is easily transferable to our modern times and to contemporary ‘dialogical leaders’, to those who qualify as ‘centres’ of a Gemeinde.

One evident example of contemporary ‘dialogical leaders’ in the light of Buber’s philosophy, and connected to the Hasidic influences I mentioned earlier, is the *Zaddik*. In *Meetings*, Buber (1967a, b):39) wrote of the relation of the *zaddik* and the *hasid* while reflecting on his childhood experiences by saying:

...I could compare on the one side with the head man of the province whose power rested on nothing but habitual compulsion; on the other with the rabbi, who was an honest and God-fearing man, but an employee of the ‘directorship of the cult’. Here, however, was another, an incomparable; here was, debased yet uninjured, the living double kernel of humanity: genuine *community* and genuine *leadership*.

The place of the *rebbe*, in its showy splendor, repelled me. The prayer house of the Hasidim with its enraptured worshippers seemed strange to me. But when I saw the *rebbe* striding through the rows of the waiting, I felt, ‘leader’, and when I saw the Hasidim dance with the Torah, I felt ‘community’. At the time there rose in me a presentiment of the fact that common reverence and common joy of soul are the foundation of genuine human community.

Avnon (1998:165) commented on this aspect of Buber’s philosophy by noting that:

The dialogue between the *zaddik* and the Hasid, sealed by the common aspiration to realize higher levels of being, grants Buber’s image of the *zaddik* an intrinsically *social* dimension. The dialogue among the members of the community is dialectically intertwined with the individual member’s dialogue with Elohim. To unveil the deeper self, to come closer to one’s being, one needs to enter into meaningful, purposeful, human relationships. To be capable of entering such human relationships, one needs an affinity to the greater reality represented by the idea of God. By serving as a living example of the way to conduct reciprocal relationships in the various circles of the community, Buber’s *zaddik* exemplifies the paradigmatic conduct of one at the *center of a community of persons committed to the fulfilment of this human need* [i.e. a community of *hasids*; my emphasis and my brackets].

Hasidic communities are for Buber the very epitome of the *Gemeinde* (cf. Yosef 1985). In the *Tales of the Hasidism*, Buber (1975:8) says that “one of the principles of Hasidism is that the *Zaddik* and the people are dependent on one another... The *teacher* helps his disciples find themselves, and in hours of desolation the *disciples* help their teacher find himself again” [my emphasis]. Thus, the *zaddik* is the ‘living, active centre’ of the community, he is the community ‘builder’ because he enables I-Thou relations between himself and the members of his *hasidic court* as well as among the members of the group. And through enabling I-Thou relations in this way, the *zaddik*, as Avnon noted in the above quoted passage, enables a dialogue with the eternal Thou through ‘situational revelations’ and the demands of the hour, rendering the life in the *Gemeinde* full of meaning. However, I would argue that the problem of the ‘continuation’ of the *Gemeinde* remains even in these quintessential *Gemeinden* because once the founding *rebbe*, the *zaddik*, dies, the leadership of the community usually passes to

a son or close relative. This gives rise to dynasties in these *Hasidic courts* and turns the *zaddik* into a leader similar to the *king* (*melech* and *mashiach* - as previously discussed) with no guarantees that those inheriting the position will be worthy of the task and capable of becoming ‘builders’, ‘centres’ of the community; and as such, the Hasidic Gemeinde faces the continuous threat of dissolution. This is part of the existential condition of the Gemeinde because it is innately characterised by the threat of discontinuity, and its continuity will always depend upon a successful ‘renewal’ of the ‘centre’, of the ‘builder’.

This discussion about the Hasidic Gemeinde as a prime example of a true community leads us to an important aspect of the Gemeinde and of the Baumeister; that is, the spiritual facet that is part and parcel of them, I would argue that one can expand on this by referring to Buber’s essay *Herut: On Youth and Religion* (1919), written before *I and Thou* (1923), which demonstrates that Buber was engaged with the philosophical issue of ‘the builder’ and of ‘the true community’ for many years.⁸ In a particular passage in *Herut* Buber (1995:154–155), arguably, seems to put forward that which can be considered the necessary and sufficient qualities for ‘the builder’:

When bound to his people, man is aware that the living community of this people is composed of three elements. Preceding him, there is the people’s sacred work, expressed in literature and history, the scroll of words and deeds whose letters tell the chronicle of this people’s relation to its God. Around him, there is the present national body in which, no matter how degenerate it may be, the divine Presence continues to live, immured in the tragic darkness of the everyday, yet shedding upon it the radiance of its primordial fire. And within him, in his soul’s innermost recesses, there is a silent, age-old memory from which, if he can but unlock it, truer knowledge pours forth for him than that from the shallow wavelets of his private experiences. But this deep wellspring can be unlocked only by him who has made his wholehearted decision for such a bond.

Through my previous discussion on ‘the builder’, it was established that he is the ‘central Thou’ of the Gemeinde, enabling I-Thou relations between himself and the members of the community, as well as among the group. But in order to do so, the individual who emerges as ‘the builder’ must possess some characteristics that will enable him to become the ‘central Thou’. According to the above quote from *Herut*, Buber suggests the characteristics of ‘the builder’ are threefold. First, ‘the builder’ has to be aware of the historical and deep connection between humanity and the divine; second, ‘the builder’ must be sensitive to the fact that despite possible appearances that this deep connection has been broken, it is, in fact, always in place; third, ‘the builder’ must accept, and believe the fact, that it is possible for him or her to access this divine connection and make sense of it. It is the possession of these three attributes that

⁸ The argument in *Herut* (Freedom) by Buber, and in *Die Bauleute* (The Builders), Rosenzweig’s open reply to Buber is centred around the notions of Gebot (divine bidding) and Gesetz (Law). For Buber, Gesetz should not be understood as something crystallised, but as a potential-Gebot (cf. Putnam 2008:16). Rosenzweig disagreed and emphasised that hyphenated Jews (e.g. communist Jews, secular Jews etc.) could return to being full Jews through bidding to Gesetz (cf. Greenberg 2011: 265; Rosenzweig (1998:134–135). Buber and Rosenzweig exchanged numerous letters in 1924 on this issue (Buber 1991:314–320; cf. also Mendes-Flohr 1991:283–284; 300; Bernat-Kunin 2007:72–78; Huston 2007:191–192; Levenson 2006: 92–94).

enables the individual to become ‘the builder’, unlocking and encouraging I-Thou relations between himself and the members of the group, as well as amongst the members themselves. Moreover, ‘the builder’ “must realize that something bigger is at stake: that one must join, earnestly and ready for much struggle and work,...; that one must recreate this process from within, with reverence of soul and awareness of mind; that one must participate in it not only with his inwardness but with his total life” (Buber 1995:160). Concrete historical examples of individuals who responded to the ‘the call’ are numerous, and we can mention again the case of Abraham and Moses as prime examples of this; however, there are also contemporary individuals such as Theodor Herzl, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela, who realised “that something bigger” was “at stake” and engaged with it, encouraging I-Thou relations between themselves and members of the group, as well as amongst the group, in the process.

The above becomes even more obvious if we consider that Buber did not use the German word ‘*Führer*’ (Leader), but ‘*Baumeister*’ (Builder) to describe the “living, active centre” of the *Gemeinde*. In *I and Thou* Buber (1958:55–56) refers to Napoleon, the epitome of ‘the leader’, and says:

He was for millions the demonic *Thou*, the *Thou* that does not respond, that responds to *Thou* with *It*, that does not respond genuinely in the personal sphere but responds only in his own sphere, his particular Cause, with his own deeds. This demonic *Thou*, to which no one can become *Thou*, is the elementary barrier of history, where the basic word of connexion loses its reality, its character of mutual action...Towards him everything flames but his fire is cold. To him a thousand several relations lead, but from him none. He shares in no reality, but in him immensurable share is taken as through in a reality.

‘The leader’ contrasts with ‘the builder’, because he is incapable of establishing I-Thou relations with Others. ‘The leader’ is able to galvanise support and unite individuals but he does not ‘listen’ or ‘dialogue’ with Others, using and objectifying them to achieve his own goals. This is the reason Buber refers to ‘the leader’ as a *demonic Thou*, a disguised Thou trapped in a monological existence; he lacks the spiritual dimension necessary to be a ‘builder’. ‘The leader’ and his supporters are so entrenched in I-It relations, that a *Gemeinde* can never emerge unless they change their ways and embrace I-Thou relations. As I mentioned before, Napoleon was for Buber the perfect example of the demonic *Thou* when he wrote *I and Thou*; however, years later he referred to Hitler in much the same terms (cf. Friedman 2002:128–129; Kramer 2003:114:115). I quote Buber (1967a, b:725–726): “Hitler is incapable of really addressing one and incapable of really listening to one...I once...heard him speak. I knew that this voice was in the position to annihilate me together with countless of my brothers and sisters”.

In another interesting passage of *Herut* Buber seems to take an elitist stand, suggesting that only a few people can be ‘builders’. Buber (1995:162) writes that: “There are the people for whom this address is intended. There are only a few of them”. However, in his essay *The Builders* (1924), Rosenzweig (1924; 2002:72) takes issue with this and refers directly to the Talmud (cf. Babylonian Talmud Tractate Berachot 64a) in the epigraph, and says: “And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of thy children! (Isaiah, 54:13). Do not read ‘banayikh’, thy

children, but ‘bonayikh’, thy builders”. I believe that the disaccord here is only superficial and that Buber fundamentally agreed with Rosenzweig that “we are, as Scripture puts it, ‘children’; we are, as tradition reads it ‘Builders’” (Rosenzweig 2002:91), but he was only stating that only a few ‘in every generation is able to rise up and become a builder’. This is perhaps a direct allusion to the saying ‘in every generation is born a potential Messiah’ (cf. Babylonian Talmud (1977), Tractate Sanhedrin 98a).

Buber’s choice of ‘*Baumeister*’ (Builder), not of ‘*Führer*’ (Leader), as the “living, active centre” also demonstrates that he was not primarily concerned with ‘mass society’, the *Gesellschaft*, but with ‘community’, the *Gemeinschaft*. I note that Buber’s understanding of these terms is similar to that of Ferdinand Tönnies. Buber was certainly familiar with Tönnies’ *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft*, first published in 1887, since he acknowledges in a lecture in 1938 that his position as a social theorist is influenced by Tönnies (cf. Silberstein 1989:169; Fischhoff 1958:xi–x). According to Tönnies, in *Gemeinschaft*, which is usually translated as ‘community’, people have simple, direct face-to-face relations determined by their natural and spontaneous emotions and sentiments for each other – with rural communities providing him with contemporary examples of this; whilst in *Gesellschaft*, which is usually translated as ‘society’, people pursue their self-interests and calculate their actions and, in so doing, they erode the traditional bonds of the family and kinship that are the foundation of *Gemeinschaft* - and modern cosmopolitan societies are again examples of this (cf. Morgan and Guilherme 2013: 121). Tönnies (2001:17) characterise these as:

Community means genuine, enduring life together, whereas Society is a transient and superficial thing. Thus *Gemeinschaft* must be understood as a living organism in its own right, while *Gesellschaft* is a mechanical aggregate and artefact.

Buber appreciated Tönnies insight and the interdependence of the concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and connected these directly to his basic words *I-Thou* and *I-It* relations. Accordingly, and as there is a constant oscillation between *I-Thou* and *I-It* relations, there is also a constant interaction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. I argue that the great challenge of our modern times is to encourage the community within society, and this means to keep reminding ourselves that we must form communities whilst living in society, just as we must keep reminding ourselves that we must relate to our fellow human beings not just through *I-It* relations but also through *I-Thou* ones. Silberstein (1989:185–186) comments:

Just as a person is always in a state of becoming, living in the ebb and flow of experience/relation, or monologue/dialogue, society continually moves between two poles – the political and the social. The political principle, which dominates modern life, is reflected in the modern tendency to absolutize the state. The social principle, on the other hand, is reflected in the recurring efforts to establish small communes that facilitate mutual responsibility and direct relationships between persons.

If the above can be achieved, then I further argue that we would be a step closer to fulfilling Buber’s social political project of establishing a *comunitas comunitatum*, that utopia of ‘a community of communities’ that he so much defended in *Paths of Utopia*. But it is in the nature of utopias that they can never be achieved; their importance lies in providing

us with both a guiding compass into ‘what might be established in *reality*’ if we work for it (and in this sense, ‘the utopian ideal’ might evolve continuously as we progress) and to steer us away from the ‘dreadful consequences of doing otherwise’, which would lead us closer to living in a form of dystopia, a reality that we rather not contemplate.

Yet, Buber disagreed with Tönnies that a *Gemeinde* depends on one’s will to be part of it or on one’s sentiments for the Other members of the group (and this latter point places him in opposition to Weber as I noted previously); rather, and as my discussion thus far established, for Buber a *Gemeinde* depends on both i. the interactions between the members of the group and ii. the interactions between the members and ‘the living centre’ of the group - both of which based on I-Thou relations, *on turning towards the Other*. Sentiments can only emerge once the *Gemeinde* has been established, and as such Tönnies and Weber appear to have committed a fundamental mistake in their respective analysis of the *Gemeinde*.

To conclude this section. Buber’s understanding of *Gemeinde* leads to a new conceptualisation of social transformations. These are neither the sole outcome of top-to-bottom ventures (i.e. first at the *Gesellschaft* level, which will then trickle down to the *Gemeinde* level; e.g. social policy) nor are they the sole result of bottom-up actions (i.e. start at the *Gemeinde* level and hope that this will affect *Gesellschaft*; e.g. grassroots movements); rather, transformations are the product of an interplay between both of these just as there is an interplay between *I-Thou* and *I-It relations* (cf. Morgan and Guilherme 2013: 121–122). I would argue that the implications of Buber’s thought for social transformations appear to be non-reductionist, providing a ‘concrete assessment and description’ of what happens in reality, which is in accordance with his ‘anthropological philosophy’.

Final Thoughts

In this article I set out to explore an important passage of Buber's *I and Thou* where he characterises the *Gemeinde*, stating explicitly that ‘the centre’ is a pivotal aspect of *Gemeinde* formation. I reflected upon two important interpretations of ‘the centre’, namely the Mendes-Flohrian, which interprets this concept as a ‘situational revelation’, and the Avnonian, which considers the ‘centre’ to be ‘the builder’, the community leader. Upon reaching the end of this article, I contend that the Avnonian understanding offers us a more sustainable interpretation of Buber’s thought because it both acknowledges its ‘anthropological’ concerns and does not overlook a crucial sentence of that important passage, where Buber refers to ‘the builder’ [der Baumeister]. One can only speculate the reasons why Mendes-Flohr, and other commentators such as Susser, have ignored the reference to ‘the builder’ in that passage. It is possible that they simply forgotten about it or rendered it unimportant in the light of what Buber says elsewhere; or, and perhaps even more plausible, it might be the case that they have chosen to ignore it because the concept ‘the builder’ is at odds (e.g. might be seen as antidemocratic) with other aspects of Buber’s thought, or with the ideals of the time when they were writing (i.e. post-holocaust, post-Second World War, and the horrors some ‘leaders’ caused) (cf. Avnon 1993:61). Whatever the reason, I contend in the light of my reflections that the concept of ‘the builder’ is an important one for a proper understanding of Buber’s thought, and as such it should not be so readily ignored.

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