"Community - arianism"

Chapter Three: Community; some sociological perspectives

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In the first two chapters of the book we have examined some of the ways that the term "community" is used in everyday speech, in political discourse and in the practice of community workers and other community professionals. So far we have concentrated on values attached to the notion, and activities carrying the label of community. We move on now to a more descriptive task. It will be clear that it is impossible to give an agreed or authoritative definition of such a value laden, ill considered, and contested concept. One is tempted to look to sociology to provide a clear and objective definition. However, because sociology as a discipline is of necessity reflexive, in that sociologists are inextricably part of the object of their study and the dissemination of earlier sociological study has formed a feedback loop in the structuration of society (Giddens 1984), it can provide no simple formulas. Yet there are in the sociological tradition a number of perspectives which can clarify our descriptions of the concept of community, and sensitise us in our understanding of particular communities.

A good starting point is Hillery's 94 definitions of the notion of community (1955). They fell mainly into three categories, which inevitably had considerable overlap. In the first place were those which had a largely geographical or local reference, where the main concern was the place, the neighbourhood, the locality and only as an afterthought the people and their relationships. This perspective although popular and important (Dennis 1965) is perhaps best dealt with under headings such as social geography or locality studies and discussion of such themes is postponed to the next chapter. The other groups of definitions were more strictly sociological in that they focussed on relationships, between people which may or may not be centred in a particular location. One recurring theme was that of solidarity, fellow feeling, "communitas" which binds people together with a shared sense of identity or belonging. In some ways this type of discourse belongs more properly in the discipline of social psychology, although there is within the mainstream of sociology a long history of searching for the elements which like glue or cement bind society together. An alternative emphasis is on social interaction as frequent contact, and the exchange of information, goods and services tends to structure and transform networks into a self conscious entity. The two approaches have some resonance with the familiar sociological dichotomy of structure and action and the traditions associated respectively with two giants among the disciplines founders, Durkheim and Weber.

The structural functionalist approach derived from Durkheim, which is still influential in North American sociology, and via that route in communitarianism, would look for patterns and regularities in community life, and look for features, many of them below the surface of actors' awareness, that make for the smooth functioning of society. The emphasis would be on consensus and social cohesion, and the interest would be on mechanisms of solidarity, and the role of shared values and beliefs. A more action oriented approach in the Weberian tradition would be better at explaining relationships, processes and social change in communities, and would rely more heavily on interpreting the explicit accounts of actors involved in the society. A third school using the Marxist framework would bring the economic structures and relationships underlying social life into the foreground, and explain almost everything in terms of the relationships of various classes to the means of production. All of these approaches have something to offer to the study of community. Yet it is perhaps significant that one of the leading sociological theorists of our day, Giddens, who seeks in much of his work to synthesise the insights offered by these schools into one grand theory, studiously avoids the use of the term "community". In "The Constitution of Society" (1984) it appears neither in the glossary or index, and in his comprehensive textbook

"Sociology" (1982) it is indexed but once.

The industrial revolution and the urbanisation and political upheavals which accompanied it were the context in which the founding fathers of sociology were working, and had a significant impact when they selected their problematics. Plant (1974) examines the account of German thought given by Nisbet, and points to the contributions of Herder, Schiller and Hegel in the "rediscovery of community" at that time. A key notion of these German Romantics, which we shall pick up later in our discussion of postmodernity, is that of fragmentation. The whole man (person) is found in the context of traditional community, while in modernity the division of labour leads to fragmented forms of human interaction. Plant traces how the theme continues especially in urban sociology down to the work of Louis Wirth (1938) and Harvey Cox (1968).

The most influential statement of these ideas for subsequent discussion of the concept of community is Tonnies' duality between Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (association) which appeared in 1887. The popular version of the account goes like this. In the idyllic (but perhaps imaginary) village life of two centuries ago community (Gemeinschaft) was a natural state of affairs. Interaction was on a human scale and people largely lived with, worked alongside, married, worshipped with, traded with, quarreled with and were even oppressed by, people who they had known face to face all through their lives. Inevitably status was ascribed rather than achieved and there were therefore many constraints on the ability of individuals, especially the poor, females and outsiders to achieve prosperity, power and personal fulfilment or a chosen lifestyle. Relationships between people were multiplex, i.e. the same people were linked by a multi-stranded pattern of roles. The Romantic argument is that this produces intimacy, social cohesion and sympathy between the participants. To be fair to Tonnies it is important to point out that he saw Gemeinschaft not as a disappearing historical situation but as a quality and style of human interaction, that it is the intimacy of home and hearth, of religion and neighbourliness, and that even in modern urban settings it is not totally absent.

Industry, urbanisation and improved transport gradually eroded this pattern of community life, so that increasingly people resided in one place, worked in another and took their leisure in another. The appropriate description of modern urban society was associational (Gesellschaft); here people might be in contact with far greater numbers of people, but each contact was likely to be fleeting, instrumental, and only involve a single role relationship. In the city people would live in one neighbourhood, travel to work in another, take leisure in another and make contact with different sets of people in each. Organisational life would also be segmented, limited companies and unions for the work place, residents associations and groups for women, children and the retired in the neighbourhood, with special interest associations such as sports clubs, arts and drama groups, religious groups, disability support groups, serving a "community of interest" often spread over a wider catchment area.

For Tonnies the concern with the loss of Gemeinschaft betrayed a conservative set of values and their fears about the problems of social cohesion and social control in an urban world increasingly divided by class conflict. In this he has been accused of introducing the fundamental confusion of community sociology, the conflation of facts and values. For example he wrote that it is impossible to speak of bad Gemeinschaft, and described it as the more genuine form of living together. He described it as a living organism and Gesellschaft as a mechanical artifact. Contemporary sociology, being less wedded to positivism and pseudo objectivity, may be more forgiving to Tonnies here than that of the mid twentieth century. It is perhaps more unfortunate that two other confusions were introduced by the tendency to equate Gemeinschaft with Gesellschaft with two other dualities, rurality - urbanism, and traditional - modernity.

An important, though much neglected critique of this duality comes from the German sociologist Schmalenbach (Hetherington 1994). Crucially he introduces another (usefully elastic!) term "Bund", often translated into English as league or federation, to cover a conceptually (but not necessarily historically) intermediate form of human association. Here individuals chose or covenant to bind themselves together into a collective unit which takes on far greater significance and develops greater levels of solidarity /

communion than the transitory associations of Gesellschaft. Unlike Gemeinschaft, status and role relationships are not based on birth, tradition or ascription, but tend towards either radical egalitarianism or dependence on charismatic leadership. The concept of Bund has been applied to communities as diverse as kibbutzim and the Hitler Youth, and clearly has some value in the description of religious sects, orders and "intentional communities", and of collectivities such as street gangs, military units or Japanese style industrial work teams. While Bund structures have been known in both pre modern and modern periods of history, they seem by nature to have only short term stability, resolving towards Gesellschaft if they break up in the earlier stages or Gemeinschaft if they can be sustained into the second and third generation. Hetherington cites Schmalembach to argue that the Bund as an ideal type of grouping has particular relevance for the postmodern period, in which social fragmentation, de-centring of identity, and the wide range of options for lifestyle, combined with romantic nostalgia for past times, push many people into experiments with alternative forms of community.

Durkheim who was in his early years far more progressive ideologically and optimistic about the potential of modernity than Tonnies, engaged in debate with Tonnies over some shared concerns, and reinforced the dichotomy between traditional and modern societies. However he turned Tonnies terminology on its head by suggesting that mechanical solidarity was typical of traditional society and organic solidarity of the modern world. Durkheim's discussion was set in the context of his thesis of the division of labour, (1933) where he explains how a relatively simple form of economic and social linkages comparable to the machine evolved over time to become an immensely complicated network of social and economic interdependencies, a system with a life and strength of its own. Yet Durkheim recognised that this complex urban industrial world had a devastating impact on many individuals, that its numerous fragmentary relationships failed to provide social support and meaning for the whole person. He developed this notion of anomie to the full in his work on suicide, where he showed how such ultimate personal despair was most common in settings where community solidarity was weak. (1951). However, Durkheim's concerns were mainly around the relationship between individuals and society as a whole, the nation state in the Europe of his age, or the self sufficient tribe in the case of indigenous peoples of the European Empires. Thus he had relatively little to say about local forms of community, other than that the "patriotism of the parish has become an archaism that cannot be restored at will" (1933). His suggested remedy for modern social ills revolved around guild socialism and national social cohesion constructed from the building blocks of a wide range of secondary groups. His vision for such organisations in which people would work co-operatively in the common interest, would appear thoroughly communitarian in spirit.

Weber (1964) in contrast went beyond the dichotomies of Tonnies and Durkheim. As might be expected from a sociologist who was interested in human action, he began by describing four ideal types of social behaviour (Freund 1968). Associative behaviour depends on a mutually agreed and explicit set of rules and is typical of voluntary sector organisations and political parties. Behaviour based on mutual consent is governed by implicit social rules such as the practices of the market place or the code of politeness. However it must not be assumed that this implies solidarity since open or secret competition or conflict can still take place within the unwritten rules. Institutional behaviour takes place when rules are explicit and imposed from on high rather than by members themselves. Typically this form is that of the state and similar bureaucratic organisations. Weber's final type is that of group behaviour. Here people enter of their own free will and rules remain uncodified. Yet there is a clear submission to authority, and the group can exercise sanctions or coercion if necessary. Typically this form is that of a sect under charismatic leadership. Weber goes on to categorise social relationships and organisations and it is here that he uses the terms communal and associative, which are closely related in German to Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft. However in Weber there are different shades of meaning. Communal is taken to be relationships based on a subjective sense of belonging, of solidarity. Association in contrast refers to more rational forms of social organisation, based either on shared values and goals. A common form of associative relationship is the Verband or corporate group, a closed group with clearly defined rules and authority and/or representational structures. Sub types of corporate groups are enterprises, associations and institutions. Weber also distinguishes between closed and open groups, an important concept to bear in mind as we explore the notions of communities, boundary marking processes, and networks in later

chapters. Weber's study of organisational life produced important insights into the process of bureaucratisation of society and it is easy but probably an oversimplification to contrast the formal rational organisations which developed with traditional "natural" forms of "community".

Weber relates much of his analysis of social interaction to the economy and develops a quite sophisticated analysis of social class, which he distinguishes from status (1970). Persons of the same income and with the same relation to capital may be ascribed or achieve different statuses on the basis of their education, culture, religion or ethnicity for example. Here there is a clear controversy with Marx whose economic reductionism portrayed class as an objective and given category. Weber insisted that classes could not be equated in any sense with communities. Mobilisation of class interests for political and social action was not the result of an infallible economic law, but the probabilistic outcome of multiple decisions by largely rational actors. In contrast Weber saw status groups as communal, if often amorphous. Concerns of honour, lifestyle, behaviour and values can override economics in determining who deals with, befriends or marries whom. Numerous attempts have been made to draw up a universal status hierarchy on a single dimension, and most survey and census research analyses class on an occupational status basis. Weber's approach to status allows us to go beyond this and is helpful when dealing with the fragmented communities and networks of the postmodern world. It underlies for example Rex and Moore's illuminative account of housing class and ethnicity in Sparkbrook in the 1960's.

It would be impossible to complete this chapter without more than a passing reference to Karl Marx who was undoubtedly the most influential social scientist who has ever lived. His emphasis on the economic determinants of social life has already been mentioned. He saw clearly how the capitalist and industrial system of production produced workers who were alienated from the process and product of their labour, and in conflict with the owners of capital. Traditional community belonged to an earlier period of economic development and was lost for ever under capitalism. Marx longed for and predicted (misguided as it turned out) a revolutionary transformation of society to a form where common ownership would produce a universal solidarity between people. In his own time it appears that he struggled with the contradiction between the shared economic interest that should have brought exploited groups together with a shared consciousness, and the current historical reality. In the case of the French peasants that "the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organization among them, they do not form a class." (Marx 1852).
Marx as an internationalist, with his call for class solidarity, and faith in economic laws, had little time for localism or other aspects of "community". He tended to see society in terms of a simple dichotomy between the sphere of market individualism and the sphere of the state. Even when he made use of Hegel's term "civil society" to fill the middle ground, he saw this "burgerliche Gesellschaft" as a form of economic association appropriate to a limited historical juncture in early capitalism (Kumar 1993). However, later Marxists have developed the notion of civil society as the autonomous mediating structures between the individual or family and the state. Thus Gramsci (1988) develops a form of Marxism in which cultural institutions play a role outside the economy, although he shows how the hegemony of the ruling class is served by a civil society which only appears to be independent of the state and free from coercion. There as been renewed interest in the notion of civil society in recent years, most clearly in the analysis of events in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and in the role of the independent Polish trade union Solidarity. Recent studies in the Marxist tradition such as Castells (1977) have also begun to explore the role of community groups and urban social movements in political and social struggles.

The basic sociological themes in the discussion of community have changed little in the past century. As we shall see in later chapters many studies have been conducted and many insights gained. Methods for studying both local and non-local communities have become more diverse and more sophisticated. Insights into the nature of communities within institutional settings such as Asylums (Foucault 1971) have made important contributions to social theory as a whole. But no convincing grand theory of community has emerged, and has rarely been attempted. Bell and Newby (1971) underline this point several times when they characterise community studies as atheoretical and non-cumulative in the production of knowledge. They prefer to see community studies as a research method rather than a sub

discipline of sociology. Frankenberg's (1966) attempt to synthesis a theory from the findings of the mid century community studies brought together aspects of functionalism, class and status analysis and social networks but was unconvincing in its eclecticism. It also confused the issue of community with that or the rural urban continuum. Chicago school sociology, as we shall see in the next chapter, was similarly eclectic, and wedded to a conception of the urban neighbourhood as a community.

The late twentieth century has seen a reluctance among social theorists to grapple with the concept of community. Marxists tend to reject it as an ideological construction of capitalism, and as not soundly based in economic materialism. A further reason for denying any theoretical status to community is it's inextricable link to the local and parochial, which prevents a serious analysis of the global factors impacting on localities. This is the logic behind a framework for local studies which focus on economic processes and change and their impact on social life at the regional, district and neighbourhood level (Cooke 1989; Harvey 1973; 1989). Others reject the notion of community because the term itself is so vague, and despite the numerous attempts incapable of precise definition. However, the enduring popularity of Tonnies paradigm in popular discourse about social change ensures that "community" remains as an important element in the social construction and representation of society. This influential discourse is worthy of analysis in its own right as an important feature of postmodernity. It is not necessary to define the term, as we can usefully describe its usage by various actors in society, the political power invested in the term, and the way its usage, matches, fails to match or even shapes social reality.

A second reason for hanging on to the concept of community is the nature of contemporary social change itself. Globalisation and social fragmentation mean that in the social sciences the old simplicities of class analysis have succumbed to a diverse range of critical theories from various perspectives, and/or to a plurality of perspectives making no claims to be metanarratives. Most of these intellectual streams of postmodernity have in some sense a place for, or a relationship to, the notion of community. They need a middle level term between society and the individual to capture the experience that people do interact and find identity and belonging in small groups and personal networks which usually share or construct for themselves a sense of place, common heritage or values or interests. It is hard to see why the everyday term community, so frequently used to describe this feature of social life should be discarded or how it can be replaced. A grand theory of community may be for ever unattainable, but as a problematic or sensitizing notion it is here to stay.

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