"Community - arianism"

Chapter : The future of community; values and praxis

The main thrusts of this book have been:

- to remove some of the confusion around the concept of community as it is commonly used;
- to evaluate some of the policy concerns raised by communitarianism, and the practice of community development;
- to introduce some of the methods used by social scientists in studying community and neighbourhoods, and highlight their key findings;
- to consider some trends of the postmodern period in terms of their impact on the concept and practice of community.

In this final chapter the main arguments and conclusions are summarised, before moving on to sketch a philosophy and practice for enhancing community life that may rest on a sounder base in reality than many of the simplistic and nostalgic formulations and slogans of popular communitarianism.

Start of Chapter Nine | **Contents**

Clarifying the concept

Deliberately no attempt has been made to give a definition of community. In exploring the use of the concept we have noted that there are hundreds of definitions and numerous usages on offer and that they cover three key themes, locality and scale, community feeling or solidarity, and patterns and networks of social interaction. We have noted how the term is used ideologically, by governments wanting to avoid expense and responsibility and in opposition by oppressed, excluded and marginalised groups. We have also noted the nostalgia, utopian idealism and normative emphasis in many formulations of community. It has been argued that the most common mistake is the re-ification of community, when an analysis of the processes in overlapping networks with closely knit core components, which are sometimes but not usually geographically centred, corresponds more closely to reality. But in face of the frequent popular and political usage of the term we have not felt able to abandon it altogether. At the very least it presents a useful and important problematic.

Start of Chapter Nine | **Contents**

Policy

Communitarianism we have argued can be seen as a the search for a middle way between the harsh, divisive and dysfunctional nature of free market economics and the bureaucratic state collectivism that has evidently failed to deliver its promises. While we have seen much to commend in the emphasis on subsidiarity, democracy, participation and civic responsibility, it has been necessary to approach it with ideological suspicion, and not simply because it comes from the USA. Caution is needed because it has been taken up quite eagerly across the political spectrum, which is arguably moving overall towards the Right. We have noted some key questions that communitarianism does not yet seem to have adequately addressed, such as economic structure and inequality, social exclusion, the non-local aspects of community, ethnic diversity, feminist demands and global environmental issues. The assumption that all conflicts can be settled on the basis of democratic debate based on common core values in post modern plural society is probably unsustainable. The moral tone of communitarian statements about the family is also questionable. This is not so much because it expresses a preference for marriage and stable two parent families over libertarian sexual attitudes, but because it opens the way to stereotyping, blaming and stigmatising single parents, and advocating welfare cuts which will make successful childrearing even more difficult.

We have also in Chapter Two looked at the growth of community delivery of services, and the practice of community development. Again we have found much to commend in terms of participation, accountability, relevance to local people and even value for money. But we have noticed also that many projects and models of community care are used to mask retrenchment of state welfare services, or to buy off or co-opt local opposition. Community development when sponsored independently of, or in opposition to, the state and using Freirian techniques can have a powerful emancipatory and educative impact. In contrast state led community development is full of inherent contradictions which impose serious limits to what it can achieve.

Start of Chapter Nine | **Contents**

Social analysis

In various places in the book we have discussed how social scientists from different disciplines have approached community and local studies. Geographers, Planners and the Chicago urban sociologists, offer sophisticated techniques of quantitative and spatial analysis based on Census or survey data for local areas, but struggle to capture the aspects of community that transcend place. The functionalist tradition of community studies is instructive, but finds it hard to move away from the accusation that such studies are one off, atheoretical and not very good at dealing with conflict and change. Qualitative and interpretative sociology is useful for exploring the meaning of community for various types of people. Anthropology offers ways of looking at culture and ethnicity as well as what is probably the most powerful tool of all, social network analysis. This technique is excellent for mapping relationships, both between individuals and organisations, and even the electronic linkages of cyberspace. Its Achilles heel may be its mathematical abstraction, and not simply because it repels the less numerate. Intrinsically it is hard to capture in mathematical form the variation in the nature of different relationships; while intensity of contact between two people can be measured it is much harder to quantify the levels of affection and/or hostility and the relative importance of a kind word to a neighbour as opposed to lending money or twenty four hour caring for an incontinent elderly relative. It is out of such acts of reciprocal exchange and altruism that the networks of personal relationship and ultimately the quality of community life is built.

Start of Chapter Nine | **Contents**

Historical trends

Despite many reservations about conservatism and nostalgia we have found it hard to dispense with the Tonnies paradigm of the transition from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft society, and the contention that through the processes of urbanisation, modernisation and globalisation, something in the nature of community has been irretrievably lost. The nature of, and especially the value attached, to this loss is a matter for debate. Some remnants of traditional Gemeinschaft community do, despite everything, persist. There is also some force in the argument that individuals have been liberated from the constricting bonds of traditional community, and can enjoy the freedom of constructing networks and communities of whomsoever they choose. However the long term process seems clear, and electronic networking takes it a stage further. Privatisation leads to atomised and fragmented local social systems, while global communication and economic interdependency favour remote and massive institutions. Human life appears to the individual as compartmentalised, fragmented, normless and meaningless while at the same time society is organically unified on a global scale as never before. It is not surprising that so many people long for the rebuilding of community, however misguided their nostalgia, or however undesirable some of its unforeseen consequences might be.

Start of Chapter Nine | **Contents**

The future of community

In order to enage in debate on future trends and policies we need to refer to the factors that might favour or hinder the rebuilding of community as advocated by communitarians. In an age when the rationality of the Enlightenment has burnt itself out it may be nigh on impossible to retain objectivity, even if this were desirable. In the discussion we will find many complexities and contradictions. In the changing contemporary world are features which in turn alarm and excite those who value the notion of community. It will be extremely difficult to impose a coherent analysis on what is happening, for there are many different perspectives which may throw light on the subject. But it is precisely this, the impossibility of grand narratives and unambiguous theories that is a feature of the present age and the central "big idea" (sic.) of those who call themselves postmodernists (Baumann 1992, Wagner 1994, and Lyon 1994).

One key national and international trend is the growing polarisation of the haves and the have nots. With the idolatry of market forces it is no accident that poverty is growing in urban Britain and a new class of the excluded is emerging all over Europe. Clearly such polarisation is detrimental to world peace, social cohesion at the national level and in a climate of acquisitive individualism to the possibility of solidarity and mutual care at the local neighbourhood level. Indeed any serious analysis of these patterns of social injustice brings into question the very notion of community, with its implied valuing of consensus and the common good. A more critical form of sociology, based on assumptions of inherent conflict in global society, such as Christian emphasis on the imperfection of humankind, the emphasis on class struggle seen in Marxism and its derivatives, and the critical social analysis of feminist and black writers may have much to offer.

Social polarisation inevitably has political consequences. While it may be possible for the market to keep at least two thirds of the population in the growing affluence to which they have become accustomed, and therefore politically compliant, a substantial number are counted among the excluded. For these people the image of a postmodern world where all imaginable choices are possible is a cruel fantasy; they may have time to spare but leisure is a commodity they cannot afford to buy. A basic welfare safety net, coupled with increasingly repressive surveillance and policing, and the fragmentation of this "underclass" into ethnic and lifestyle sub groups may be enough to stave off their political mobilisation, or uprising. But the result will certainly not be a society at ease with itself.

One feature of the polarisation process may modify the picture. There is growing evidence of increasing geographic segregation of the "underclass" population from affluent neighbourhoods. As deprivation becomes concentrated in regions of economic decline such as former coalfields, in public housing estates on the periphery of major cities and in the ethnic minority "ghettos" of the inner cities, people struggling with poverty, and with limited access to transportation, are more and more likely to have social networks consisting mainly of people like themselves (Green 1994). The silver lining from a communitarians perspective is that there are in these circumstances increased possibilities for economic activity based on rules other than the market, for the growth of communal solidarity and socio-political mobilisation. Thus in an unexpected way the very thing that communitarians fear, the breakdown of social cohesion may lead to the rebuilding of local oppositional and marginalised communities.

Whether such communities can ever become self sufficient even at a subsistence level, or whether they will remain dependent on the largesse of mainstream society depends on political choices which will not be easy for governments to make. It seems unlikely, given the circumstances of postmodern western culture, with its apolitical fragmentation, that community mobilisation of excluded people can emerge spontaneously. It would need a substantial input of radical community organisation, of the kind that capitalist states are least likely to sponsor or fund to transform resistance from sporadic sniping at the system to effective mass action. Either way there is likely to be suffering and conflict both for their members and society as a whole, and more defeats than victories along the way.

Despite all this community values continue to put up a low level resistance to market forces, across the social spectrum. We have described earlier the process of commodification, by which every single good or service comes to have a price, and can be evaluated in monetary terms. Increasingly market values come to dominate sectors which previously were seen as non-commercial, not for profit, such as health, education and the voluntary sector. Even the classic British example of the gift relationship, blood donation (Titmuss 1970), seems to be under threat as discussion takes place on offering payment per pint, while human organs, semen and processes such as in vitro fertilisation or surrogate motherhood have already been offered in the market place. However, commodification can be resisted in some areas, and needs to be held back if communitarian values are to prevail.

One area which continues to hold out to the incursion of market forces is domestic labour and family care, where unpaid labour (usually by women) is still the norm. In this case, despite feminist demands, and the growth of paid child-minding, the market mechanisms are less than perfect, for the monetary costs would be immensely beyond what the resources of the state, or the profitability of capital could bear. Many people are not going to stand idly by and see their children and elderly relatives, and by extension their friends, neighbours and even homeless strangers neglected, simply because they cannot afford to pay for basic care. A minority of people will continue to offer generous help as individuals, and to organise together to form baby sitting circles, collections for medical charities, neighbourhood care schemes, luncheon clubs and night shelters. The withdrawal of the state from such services leaves a great opportunity for such community activity. While most of the people involved will recognise that this is second best to the whole community of a nation state making adequate provision for welfare, such projects will be essential for social well being, and a powerful witness to the moral bankruptcy of post-modern individualism.

The same rationales apply to almost all of the community sector, where voluntary unpaid effort is both economically essential and central to the ethos. Running the local scout group, sitting on the management committee of the community centre, or being active in local politics, will be among the last activities to warrant a pay packet. The principle of voluntarism in local communities is certain to survive, and as information technologies enable worldwide communities of interest to coalesce more easily there will be many new opportunities. But for community activism to flourish it needs to be underpinned by a philosophy that goes beyond considerations of cost saving and individual duty.

Start of Chapter Nine | **Contents**

Values for an alternative communitarianism

While the sociological debates about modernity and postmodernity can give us useful insights into the nature of the social world in which the processes of community takes place, the philosophical approach of postmodernism is likely to prove barren. The pick and mix approach to life also extends from the candy counter to the realm of values. In the New Age environment where all is relative, even religion or belonging to a community becomes a matter of consumer choice (O'Neill 1988). In philosophy, sociology and literature "all that is solid melts into air" in Karl Marx's phrase, into a plethora of narratives and images, drawn from a treasure chest of earlier styles, and stuck together in a meaningless collage, where the possibility of a unifying truth or universal aesthetic is discounted. (Kellner 1988, Baumann 1988). A postmodernism which merely revels in the fragmentation, enjoys pick and mix culture, and indulges itself in electronic global networking is no answer for the excluded and marginalised people of places like Newham. Indeed one of the strongest critiques of postmodernist thinking is that it lacks any firm ethical base, or notion of social justice on which social and political action might be built.

The communitarians are right about the importance of values as a pre-requisite for community. But the ground is less firm when they seek to specify the common core of these values. Etzioni lists commitment to democracy and the Bill of Rights, and respect for other groups, as being basic to the United States community (Etzioni 1994 p157). However, the limited political and cultural context in which these are set, together with their vagueness make them useless as a general framework for community life. Instead we will sketch some core values around which people of many faiths and none might engage in community development and organising. For some these values will have a religious basis, for others they are those of socialism or common human decency. But they could be endorsed by most who see community work as a worthwhile task. They should not however be seen as democratically derived consensus or lowest common denominator values which can become the shared basis of national life. It is at this point that they distance us from the communitarian project of Etzioni, and the pragmatism of Alinsky. For these values are likely to be in conflict with the dominant culture, especially when put into practice. The nature of community they engender is largely an oppositional rather than a consensus one. They have in them the seeds of an alternative form of communitarianism, that begins from the bottom up, that challenges the status quo, and could offer a degree of liberation from enslavement to market forces and political vested interests.

The first of these values is the importance, one can even say sacredness of the human person. People matter, indeed they matter more than things or money. An alternative communitarianism therefore needs to value the dignity, potential, opinions and contribution to society of every person however imperfect, and to resist the trend to be dominated by the market.

The second key value is that of solidarity, community or mutuality (Holman 1993). People are not by nature isolated individuals but only find meaning, purpose and fullness of life in relationship with others. An alternative communitarianism therefore values building relationships, sharing resources, collective life and group action for its own sake while recognising the ambiguities, compromises and conflicts which community entails. At the same time it must resist the temptations to romanticise and absolutise community, to accept closure of the boundaries of particular communities and to impose community values and standards on unwilling individuals, other than in the extreme case of antisocial behaviour where legal sanctions might apply.

The third value is that of neighbourliness. An alternative communitarianism presupposes some value in the Judaeo-Christian concept of neighbour love. Whether this remains purely on the basis of self interest and mutual obligation, or extends to self sacrificial altruism, neighbourliness reaches out to others, especially to those in need. "Who is my neighbour?" demands an answer which goes beyond the end of the street and transcends natural friendship or in-group loyalty. The parable of the Good Samaritan remains relevant, although it needs to be guarded from idiosyncratic interpretations such as Thatcher's

homily on wealth creation! The point of it is that care and responsibility must extend at some personal cost and risk across social boundaries to all whom we encounter.

The fourth key value is that of Justice and Equality. Alternative communitarianism is based on the doctrine that all people are created or born equal and looks forward to a world, or is guided by a utopian dream, where everyone will have a fair share of resources and an equal opportunity to flourish. The poor and the weak would not be excluded from participation, and there would be no discrimination based on race, class, gender or any other given or ascribed characteristics. However, distant the prospect this radical equality should remain a goal at local and global levels. Therefore anti-racism, anti-sexism and other aspects of social justice are central to the enterprise today, although the details of policy must remain open to debate and political resolution.

Finally a longing for harmony between all people and the peaceful resolution of conflict must guide this alternative communitarianism. As long as human beings remain imperfectly human, social and political life takes place in the arena of conflict. While on the one hand concern for justice often polarises conflict, on the other a concern for neighbouring and the very notion of community pushes in the direction of harmony. It is obvious that alternative communitarians will take different ideological positions over the role of conflict, and that even an individual may respond in pragmatically different ways in specific conflicts (e.g. only confront on "winnable issues"). However, in all but the most extreme cases most will prefer to explore democratic, negotiating, constructive strategies before embarking on confrontations which have the potential for violence and destruction.

Strangely these values seem premodern, irrational and unmarketable, therefore ill at ease in a modern world. In a postmodern world, they may be more at home if only as nostalgia for the imagined communities of yesteryear, or as harbingers of the New Age. They seem at the same time both conservative and revolutionary. Perhaps their true significance is that they are of eternal value, being drawn from a book inspired by one who was there in the beginning and will be there at the end of time.

Our alternative communitarianism has numerous affinities with the model of dialogical communitarianism advocated by Frazer & Lacey (1993). Their feminist reading of political and social theory rejects both liberalism with its stress on individual autonomy and standard communitarianism with its relatively naive view of homogeneous and consensual social structure. Instead they work from a relational concept of the human subject, (persons in community if you will) and an understanding that social process and practices as well as social structure have an effect on social reality. Here they draw in part on Giddens notion of structuration (1984). Their approach seeks to be interpretive in valuing the experience and accounts of people, but also critical or evaluative in recognising that inequalities and oppressions violate ethical norms. They recognise the pluralism and fragmentation of post-modern life, but hold that it is still possible for individuals to remain integrated persons, even when engaged in intra-personal dialogue and overlapping networks of relationships. Although the oppression of women is for them a key issue it is by no means the only one, and their practice of politics would involve alliances with other marginalised groups in struggle for transformation. Such change would be sought at the levels of language and culture, of the distribution of power and economic outcome, and across the illegitimate divide of public and private life. To such a praxis for change we now finally turn.

Start of Chapter Nine | **Contents**

A strategy

Alternative communitarians will need to develop a praxis based on the values outlined above. They will be eager to be involved in community life, in community development and political action. They will wish to live and organise according to their values, in collaboration with others who share all or part of

their vision. They will have strong and distinct views, which will not always be politically popular, but they will resist the temptation to become fundamentalist and sectarian. Honest open debate, and accountability to the widest possible constituency will be very important. This has serious implications for those who are in any sense producers of culture and ideas; writers, artists, politicians and intellectuals. They will be less concerned about their personal contribution, reputation and freedom of expression, but more conscious that they and their products are inter woven with the social fabric which covers their nakedness! They will therefore want to acknowledge and support the role of ordinary people in community in shaping ideas, art and policies.

Alternative Communitarians will accept the need for a distinct lifestyle as active members of face to face communities. For most this will mean seeking to live as households in neighbourhoods, rather than as private individuals in anonymous residential estates. It will imply taking responsibility for the welfare not only of partners and children, but of extended family, of neighbours and friends, and of any fellow human being in need. Many alternative communitarians may find strength from belonging to a local religious congregation or faith community, where a sense of shared values and heritage binds people together, provided that such a group is not sectarian and inward looking. An alternative communitarian lifestyle might also imply some self imposed restrictions on consumer choice, for example choosing to live in a place because of closeness to personal networks rather than because of amenities, convenient location or status. It could mean cutting down on the time spent in employment, commuting and international conferences, not to mention computing, for the purpose of giving more attention to other people's needs. For high earners at least, in a society where taxation no longer attempts to redistribute wealth towards the poor, there is the challenge to turn down high salaries (Holman 1993), or at least to give away that which is surplus to basic needs.

An active life as an alternative communitarian would demand a commitment to encouraging others in voluntarism and community involvement. Time would be spent seeking to enable more people to become involved in the existing active networks of community life, and developing a wider range of groups, projects, organisations and structures for voluntary involvement, with an emphasis on serving, empowering and articulating the needs of the socially excluded. It would be recognised that some networks or organisations would be formed on a residential neighbourhood basis, and others on the basis of common interest with people gathered from a wider catchment area. Some such groups would inevitably develop into professionally run voluntary sector service agencies but the dangers of being co-opted by the state or seduced by the market need to borne in mind. Many community groups can be viable and effective without needing to take on bureaucratic formal management structures or paid staff, and will be best advised to stay in the world of the jumble sale and the informal chat over a cup of tea.

Finally alternative communitarianism entails moving beyond community development to political action. It involves solidarity with the socially excluded and entering into their struggles for social justice. Where possible it means working for grass roots communities to be democratically and effectively represented in the local power structures such as the City Councils, Health Authorities and Urban Development Partnership programmes. Often there will be a need to campaign effectively from outside the structures, with lobbying, petitions and direct action such as boycotts and demonstrations. Many such campaigns will be local or single issue movements, and it may sometimes be difficult to choose between competing causes and conflicting marginalised groups in struggle. However, alternative communitarians will not ignore global responsibilities. Social analysis which points to international causes of oppression, will need campaigns and action at the global level. Here perhaps information technology may have a role to play, as it aids networking and coalition building, enables sharing of experience and could build international solidarity as never before.

The agendas of this alternative communitarianism are modest, especially in comparison with those of the communitarian platform of Etzioni and his network. However, they are I believe less open to sloganising and ideological highjacking, and more solidly rooted in social analysis of the postmodern condition. They fully recognise the messy and conflictual nature of human society and yet are informed by some of its nobler aspirations and ideals. While the fulfilment of such hopes is unlikely to be seen this side of

Kingdom come, simply by engaging in the struggle one bears witness to two timeless virtues, Justice and Love. It is on these pillars alone that real community can be built.

Start of Chapter Nine | **Contents**
