Ties, Nets and an Elastic Bund: Community in the Postmodern City

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ABSTRACT This article attempts to clarify some of the many value-laden meanings of *community* found in the discourses of politics and *community work in Britain* in the 1990s. It examines some historical developments in society and sociological understandings of community down to present '*postmodern*' times, majoring on the concepts of Gemeinschaft, Gesellschaft & Bund and the insights of *community studies*. Finally the paper will seek to set the notion and practice of community work within a *value system* derived from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and to spell out the implications for community work in urban Britain at the end of the 20th century.

Community . . . The Sacred Word

Of all the words in sociological discourse community is the one that most obviously comes from Wonderland, in that it can mean just what you want. It is in the words of our title elastic indeed. In 1955, Hillery listed 94 definitions and suggested that the only common thread was people. It is a fine example of a 'motherhood' word, in that it produces a warm glow in the listener and elevates the speaker to the moral high ground (Donnison, 1993). It is attractive to politicians of both Left and Right, judging by cross-party interest in the communitarian ideas of Etzioni (1995). It is on everyone's lips, yet being 'sacred' allows its privileged use by priests, and philosophers. It will be no surprise therefore if this paper slides from sociology into theology as the discussion is developed.

However, the notion that 'community' is an intrinsic good has been challenged, for example by Edward Norman (1994), and Pahl (1995). They argue that traditional community was morally and culturally narrow-minded, oppressive to women, outsiders and minorities, less harmonious than painted by nostalgia and inimical to individual rights.

Community as Ideology & Utopia

In the UK in the 1980s, when individualism and privatisation were rampant, and a Prime Minister denied the existence of society, the language of community flourished. Community care and community policing were introduced and praised by government (Wilmott, 1989). The churches and

voluntary sector sponsored numerous community projects, especially in urban areas (ACUPA, 1985). Health services were delivered by 'community' practitioners and local authorities became enablers, drawing up community development and partnership strategies for urban regeneration.

Community often emerges out of oppression and can easily (and often correctly) be defined and mobilised as opposition to the coercive state, or big business. The British miners' strike of 1984 was seen by many as a response to attack on the traditional mining 'communities' (*Gemeinschaft*; sic!). The solidarity and support networks generated in the coalfields were portrayed as a triumph for community development, despite the defeat of the strike and the annihilation of the industry.

David Lyon pointed out in (1984) that the halo of 'community' can be used by the Left to justify almost any local political action, and the attempt to build diverse types of alternative, utopian collectives. Meanwhile, the Right-wing use 'community' ideologically, for example to disguise welfare budget reductions as care in the 'community', by unpaid female kin. The notion 'community' was even used to sanitise the most individualised and regressive local tax that Britain had seen for centuries. However, the ideology was unmasked as the 'community charge' became universally known as the 'poll tax', provoked massive unrest and non-payment, and helped end Margaret Thatcher's political career.

Ethnicity & Community

Recently the ideology of community/*Gemeinschaft* has emerged to bolster extreme nationalism, in opposition to liberal individualism and capitalism (De Benoist & Sunic, 1994). The potential of the language of community, for a socio-biological, genetically-determined racist ideology is yet to be seen, but the prospect is alarming, and not only in Eastern Europe.

In urban communities in the UK the concept of community also has racist undertones. Where a neighbourhood has received migrants, established residents (the white working class) may feel their territory has been invaded and that the culture and bonds of their community have been eroded. The opportunity for neo-Nazis to mobilise around 'community' is greatest when the indigenous community is close knit, where deprivation is at its worst and when massive neighbourhood change is imposed from outside, for example in London Docklands in the early 1990s (Husband, 1994).

However, the same language of community, ethnicity and nationalism is often employed by the Left, both to endorse pluralism, and in mobilising excluded groups in their struggles for justice. Hostility and discrimination from the dominant group (Cooper & Qureshi, 1993) may strengthen community relationships and ethnic identity. Arguably the growing significance of Islam as a marker of identity is a result of this process (Samad, 1994; Knott & Khoker, 1993), as is the attempt by black radicals to define all people from ethnic minorities as a single 'black community' on the basis of

shared experience of racism (NMP, 1991). In contrast, others (mostly older, conservative, Asians) define their community in terms of nationality, language, and culture.

Community Studies

Definitions of community fall mainly into two categories. In one, the main concern is place or neighbourhood. The rest focus on the notion of relationship, of solidarity or communion, of interaction, which may go beyond a particular location. It is impossible to talk about community today without taking into account both aspects, as Davies & Herbert (1993) and LPAC (1994) have done. However, many have preferred to abandon the notion of community as a myth (Stacey, 1969), and books by Bell & Newby (1971, 1973) represented the climax and the end-point of 'community studies' as a genre. Despite occasional attempts at revival (Bulmer, 1985), the focus of analysis moved onto locality studies (Cooke, 1989) and the restructuring of local economies, often based on Marxist or conflict sociology (Day & Murdoch, 1993).

Nonetheless, sociological terms often establish themselves in everyday thinking, and myths are powerful, both as ideological control mechanisms and utopian inspirations. 'Community' cannot be discarded, although it is best to see it as a problematic, a sensitising notion that focuses our thoughts on important issues.

Community, Lost Saved or Liberated

In sociology, as in popular discourse, discussions about community have been shaped by Tonnies' concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (1887). Like many others since, he feared that human relationships were being harmed by technological change, and urbanisation. In his account of traditional village life, community (*Gemeinschaft*) was a natural state. Interaction was on a human scale and people worked, married, worshipped, traded, quarreled with, and were even oppressed by, people whom they had known all their lives. Since status was ascribed rather than achieved, everyone knew their place. Networks were multiplex, as the same people were linked in multistranded role relationships as kin, neighbour, and workmate. Tonnies (romantically) argued that this produces intimacy, social cohesion and sympathy between participants.

Industry, urbanisation and mobility meant people resided in one place, worked in another and relaxed elsewhere. Modern urban society was associational (*Gesellschaft*); people met in greater numbers, but each contact was fleeting, instrumental, and involved a single role relationship. Organisational life was also segmented; limited companies and unions at work, residents associations and neighbourhood groups for women, children and the retired, with special interest clubs such as sports, arts and

religious groups serving a 'community of interest' spread over a wider catchment area.

Tonnies would probably see his fears realised in the fragmentation, 'anomie', and lack of solidarity in today's Western society. He could cite increasing family breakdown, decreasing political and community activity, rising crime, mental illness, suicide and drug abuse rates.

This reading of social change when pursued in detail is problematic, yet has been the paradigm for most 20th Century research on communities. In both urban and rural studies with diverse methodologies, the recurring question is whether community has been 'Lost', 'Saved' or 'Liberated' (Craven & Wellman, 1973; Wellman, 1979; Willmott, 1987; Bell & Newby, 1971, 1973). Some studies seem to confirm that there is now no sense of community where local folk memory alleges that once everyone helped each other and 'left their front doors open'. But other empirical work seems to show that neighbourhood and kinship-based helping and support networks remain strong.

Elastic Bunds!

More usually, ambiguous findings push the researchers to the 'community liberated' hypothesis, which recognises that neighbourhood networks may not be strong, yet people are far from isolated, and maintain a wide range of supportive and enriching relationships (Pahl, 1995; Wenger, 1994). Mobility and telecommunications has encouraged dispersed networks of friendship, kinship and support based on community of interest, shared ethnicity or religious belonging. Maintaining relationships is increasingly a matter of personal choice.

The theme of community liberated fits well with an early, if neglected, critique of the Gemeinschaft/Gessellschaft duality by Schmalenbach (Hetherington, 1994). Crucially he introduces another (usefully elastic!) term '*Bund*', often translated into English as league or federation, to cover a conceptually intermediate form of association. Here individuals covenant together into a group, with greater levels of belonging and intimacy than the transitory associations of *Gesellschaft*. Unlike *Gemeinschaft*, status and roles are not ascribed by tradition, 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 to religious sects, street gangs, military units and Japanese work teams. Hetherington cites Schmalenbach to argue that the *Bund* has particular relevance for the postmodern period, in which social fragmentation, de-centring of identity, and romantic nostalgia for past times, push many people into experimental forms of community. It may not however deal so well with the looser knit network structures of many urban people.

Postmodernity & Postmodernism

Debates about modernity and postmodernity lead some writers to speak of the 'end of history', or these 'new times', while others stressing continuity will only speak about the crisis of modernity (Wagner, 1994). It is important to outline key trends as they have major impacts on our understanding and practice of community. It is difficult to impose a coherent analysis on their complexities and contradictions, for there are many perspectives which may throw light on the subject. It is precisely this impossibility of grand narratives and unambiguous theories that is the central 'big idea' (sic!) of those who call themselves postmodernists.

Globalisation of the economy and mass culture is complemented by technologies which bring diversity, individualisation, and privatisation, as TV channels and interactive information networks proliferate, and 'virtual communities' emerge in cyberspace. Transport technologies increase commuting, tourism and migration while information technology has some potential for countering the suffocation of the planet by petrochemical smog. New flexibility in product specifications, means that consumers are overwhelmed with choice. New sub-cultures mark their boundaries by styles of fashion or music, while manufacturers make profits from images and designer labels. The pick and mix approach to life is evident in the arts and leisure market, but also extends 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 Marx's phrase, into a meaningless collage of narratives and images, drawn from a treasure chest of earlier styles, where the possibility of universal aesthetic or truth is discounted. (Kellner, 1988; Baumann, 1988). Self-realisation or 'doing one's own thing' (especially in the private spheres of domestic life, sexuality and leisure) is the flip side of the enterprise culture, where making money in a deregulated market is the goal. The yuppy of the 1980s was the icon of this value system.

Market Values

Increasingly, market values dominate sectors which previously were seen as not-for-profit, such as health and education. Commodification threatens even the classic gift relationship of blood donation (Titmuss 1970), while human organs, semen, and surrogate motherhood are offered in the market place. One area which continues to resist market forces is housework and family care, where unpaid female labour is still the norm. Here, despite feminist demands, and paid child-minding, market mechanisms do not compete, for the costs would be beyond what the state, or capital could bear. The same economics apply to the community sector, where unpaid effort is both financially essential and central to the ethos.

Being a good neighbour, running the scout group, managing the community centre, and activisim in local politics, will be the last work to warrant payment. However the employment of staff, the introduction of management techniques and the growing contract culture are signs of commodification in the voluntary sector. Although the voluntary ethos is unlikely to perish, it is clear that a two-tier system of not-for-profit professional organisations versus unfunded grassroots groups in emerging in the UK.

A market economy inevitably leads to social polarisation. While it may be possible to keep two-thirds of the population in their accustomed growing affluence, and therefore politically compliant, others are 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. A minimal welfare safety net, coupled with repressive surveillance and policing, and the fragmentation of this 'underclass' into ethnic and lifestyle sub-groups may forestall revolt. One feature may disturb the picture, the growing segregation of the 'underclass' population from affluent neighbourhoods. With deprivation concentrated in regions of economic decline and in public housing estates, the poor are more likely to have networks of people like themselves (Green, 1994). The silver lining is that there are thus increased possibilities for solidarity and for socio-political mobilisation. However, these will remain theoretical, without a massive input of community development and community education resources.

A Crisis for Community Work

If fragmentation is a fact of life, there are major implications for community work. One fears that broad-based collective action can never succeed, because there is no overriding class interest (Jacobs 1994). Community action is reduced to neighbourhood battles on immediate issues (eg. 'stop the motorway', tenants against the travellers' site), or single issue campaigns and social movements (anti-nuclear, feminism, gay liberation, animal rights, ecology) involving self-selecting interest groups. Often such groups will be in conflict, and despite commitment to 'networking' it is on rare occasions that they can be brought into 'rainbow' coalitions.

Such trends produce a crisis for community workers who need to re-examine the values on which their involvement is based. While the debates about postmodernity give useful insights into the nature of the society in which community work takes place, postmodernism's philosophies are likely to prove barren. A praxis which merely revels in the fragmentation, enjoys pick and mix culture, and indulges itself in electronic global networking is no answer for excluded and marginalised people. Indeed the strongest critique of postmodernist thinking is that it lacks any ethics, or notion of social justice on which political action might be built.

What is needed by community workers is a philosophical basis and an effective practice for strengthening face-to-face communities, to meet the psychological needs of belonging, practical needs of mutual care, and the political need for participation and campaigning. In practice such communities need to be built up both at the neighbourhood, and community of interest level. The effort needs to be concentrated among the poorest and excluded sections of society. Wherever possible these *Bund*-type communities should be networked together into a broad movement for social justice. Although the community organising tradition from the USA (Alinsky, 1972) may have much to offer here, the evidence about its use so far in the U.K. suggests that more culturally relevant approaches are needed. (Farnell *et al.*, 1994). In American organising, much was made of the common heritage of a Judaeo–Christian value system, and the strength of churches and synagogues as a power base. Clearly religious groups could be a major factor in such a movement in Britain but their numerical weakness and the wider diversity of value systems needs to be taken into account.

The Values of Community

To conclude, 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 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. These values are likely to be in conflict with the dominant culture, especially when put into practice.

Humanity/Personality: People matter, indeed they matter more than things or money. Community work therefore needs to value the dignity, potential, opinions and contribution to society of every person, and to resist the trend to be dominated by the market.

Mutuality: (Holman, 1993) People are not by nature isolated individuals but only find meaning, purpose and fullness of life in relationship with others. Community work therefore values building relationships, collective life and group action while recognising the ambiguities, compromises and conflicts which community entails.

Neighbouring: Community work 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 transcends our natural friends or in-group. The parable of the Good Samaritan remains relevant, although it needs to be guarded from idiosyncratic interpretations such as ex-Prime Minister's Thatcher's homily on wealth creation!

Justice/Equality: Community work as we know it would not be needed in a world where everyone had a fair share of resources and an equal opportunity to flourish. Therefore anti-racism, anti-sexism and other aspects of social justice are central to the enterprise, although the detail must remain open to debate.

Peace . . . Conflict: Community work inevitably takes place in the arena of social and political conflict. While the concern for justice often polarises conflict, concern for neighbouring and the very notion of community pushes in the direction of harmony. It is obvious that community workers will take different ideological positions over the role of conflict, and that even an individual worker 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 community workers and the people they work with will prefer to explore democratic, negotiating, constructive strategies before embarking on confrontations which have the potential for violence and destruction.

Strangely these values seem *pre*-modern, 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.

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