

"Community - arianism"

Community and Communitarianism; Concepts and contexts

by Greg Smith

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Contents

- [Conditions of use](#)
- [Background information](#)
- [Outline of contents](#)
- [Preface](#)
- [Chapter 1 : Community; ideology and utopia](#)
- [Chapter 2 : Community involvement and community policy](#)
- [Chapter 3 : Community; some sociological perspectives](#)
- [Chapter 4 : Understanding neighbourhood communities](#)
- [Chapter 5 : Community studies; the ups and downs of a genre](#)
- [Chapter 6 : Community lost? Networks, neighbours and the social fabric](#)
- [Chapter 7 : Communities of identity](#)
- [Chapter 8 : Community connections in an information society](#)
- [Chapter 9 : The future of community; values and praxis](#)
- [Bibliography and Internet Resources](#)
- [Greg Smith's other publications](#)

Dedication: for Marcus, Martha and Janeß

Conditions of use

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[Top of page](#)

Background information

Rationale

This book aims to explore the concept of "community" and "communitarianism" from a variety of perspectives including those of classical sociological theory, the tradition of community studies, social network analysis, current debates on social policy and community development, in the context of the rapidly emerging information society and the crisis / end of modernity. In particular it will pick up on current debates around the concept of communitarianism, made popular on both sides of the Atlantic by Etzioni, and which is being taken up in sound-bites if not policy by politicians of Left and Right. The stance to be taken is broadly supportive of the communitarian vision but asks critical questions as to the possibility and modes of its implementation in the context of plural, fragmented urban society. Is it possible to "(re)build community" in the postmodern world where local neighbourhood belonging and identity is being replaced by individually selected identities which often transcend geography, and where the idea of a consensus of values is extremely problematic?

The book is fundamentally a critical introduction to the concept of community rather than on the philosophy or politics of communitarianism. However it is the importance of communitarianism in the late 1990's that make the book timely and relevant.

Readership

The main market would probably be undergraduate sociologists / social scientists / urban geographers, and community professionals (such as social workers, health visitors, planners, community workers, clergy etc.) especially during training or on postgraduate taught courses. Policy makers, local government officers and community activists would also find it valuable. Many of the issues covered would be of interest to an international readership, including North America and the Third World.

Level: undergraduate in social sciences, professionals and postgraduates in associated fields such as health and community work. also educated lay readership.

Courses: The book could become a main text in courses for community professionals and community workers and a supplementary text for social science courses.

Existing books:

Bell & Newby (1970) is the classic text in Community Studies but was followed by the virtual demise of the genre until Herbert & Davies (1993). This approaches community from the perspective of urban geographers and planners. Crow & Allen (1994) is perhaps the closest to the proposed book, but does not cover the impact of information technology on community. Rheingold (1994) concentrates entirely on this aspect. Wilmott (1989), Bulmer (1987) and Henderson et al. (199) cover the social policy angles on community in the British context. Etzioni's work on communitarianism is increasingly influential among policy makers and would be discussed and sympathetically critiqued in this volume.

Background:

The author has been involved in community work and social research in East London for twenty years. For the last four years he has held the post of Research Officer with Aston Community Involvement Unit, where his role is to undertake research of relevance to the voluntary sector locally and support community organisations in doing their own research. He is an honorary visiting research fellow at the University of East London, and a committee member of ARVAC (association for research in the voluntary and community sector). He has carried out various projects which raise questions about the concept of community in a (post)modern urban setting, and which address policy issues in community development, the voluntary sector and care in the community. The proposed book arose from the author's concern to set such research and community involvement in an adequate theoretical framework, and to help colleagues grapple with some of the important underlying issues which shape the context of their work. It is based on his experience of research and practice and informed by an extensive reading of the relevant academic literature in the field. However there is no intention to cover in any detail the growing philosophical and political literature around the concept of communitarianism.

[Top of page](#)

Outline of contents

[Chapter One: Community; Ideology and Utopia](#)

The book begins by flagging up the notion of community as an important feature of everyday life and some of the "commonsense" assumptions around the theme. I then introduce the theme of communitarianism and describe its emergence as a political programme in the 1990s. The chapter then begins to examine and question the various forms of ideological and utopian

discourse around "community". A term which is universally accepted as a word with a warm glow it has been used to mask social injustices as well as to inspire collective action for change. The key questions to be addressed in the book and a guide to its structure are set out.

Chapter Two: Community; policy and practice

In this chapter the policies and practices of various institutions which carry the label "community" are examined and critiqued. e.g. community care, community health, community policing, community education, community development, community capacity building, community enterprise, community organising, community action. The political and social trends which have led to a new emphasis on "community" were described. How does communitarian thinking impinge on these policies and what are the hopes and limitations of the movement?

Chapter Three: Community; towards a definition

The huge range of definitions (Hillery's 94) can be categorised in a number of ways. The first split is between geographical neighbourhood definitions and sociological ones which stress common interest or networks of interaction. Communion or solidarity introduces a distinct dimension, which can only be understood in the context of conflict and boundary marking processes. The classic sociological approaches of Tönnies (*gemeinschaft*, *gesellschaft*) are covered along with Schmalenbach's ideas of *bund* and *communion*. Reference is also made to Durkheim's notions of mechanical and organic solidarity and anomie, and to Marx & Weber.

Chapter Four: Neighbourhood communities and Community work

Using the geographical notion of community this chapter covers ways of analysing the social life of localities. What makes a neighbourhood and how can we study them? Boundaries, central places, through routes, mental maps. Housing types, tenures and the types of local residents. Census data and urban ecology. Community facilities and services, (schools, leisure centres, churches etc). Community and voluntary sector groups. Networking and mapping such local resources. Their role as mediating institutions between the citizen and the state. Participation, its potential and its limits.

Chapter Five: Community Studies; the ups and downs of a genre

A brief critical review of early work (especially Chicago school) and the British tradition (Stacey / Frankenberg / Young & Wilmott / Bell & Newby). How far did these studies capture the reality of working class life, including the role of women and family. Was community life economically determined, for example by shared employment and class struggle in local industries? How and why this tradition was superseded from the mid 1970's by locality studies which majored on economic restructuring. The reemergence of community studies in the 1990's

Chapter Six: Community lost; community liberated... Network analysis

Communitarians often assume or assert that the spirit of community needs to be rebuilt. Is it true that community spirit has died out or is this mere nostalgia? Are (post)modern people irretrievably privatised? Some key empirical studies are reviewed (including references to the author's own work). Are neighbourhood relations alive and well? Who do people turn to for support? The work of Abrams and Bulmer, Wilmott etc. in the UK, of Wellman and associates in N. America. Social anthropology introduces notions of network analysis. Implications for the communitarian project.

Chapter Seven: Fragmented communities, alternative identities

Modern cities have a wide range of overlapping communities as a result of migration and mobility. People often find their first order identity solidarity in ethnic, religious or lifestyle communities, which may or may not be geographically segregated. How should we analyse this diversity? How does ethnicity operate. Review of a number of studies of minority groups and neighbourhoods in UK and elsewhere. Is it possible, or desirable to build broad based community in the midst of such pluralism?

Chapter Eight: Virtual Community; Connections in an information society

If local communities are fragmenting in the post modern world globalisation of the economy and information networks is also increasingly obvious. Can the new technologies, such as the Internet, support local communities, or build new "communities without proximity", or will they simply be channels for the dissemination of a global culture based on Disney and McDonalds. Is the nostalgic notion of community going to be marketed in a range of virtual reality theme parks and museums?

Chapter Nine: The future of community; values, policy and practice

Do we really want or need "community"? Does it need to be local and face to face? Can community bring justice to the poor and marginalised? Does communitarianism (ala Etzioni) rest on solid ethical and sociological bases? What of citizen's / human

rights and responsibilities? Is it possible to rebuild community, or will communitarianism simply become a nostalgic political slogan for both left and right? Or will the underlying economic, technological and social trends bury the notion of local community for good? If postmodernism's thesis of fragmentation and pick and mix culture is correct, it seems unlikely that there can be any basis for shared values and community life. If modernity continues individualism and economic rationality run counter to the spirit of community.

Community can only be revived on the basis of age old values about human nature and responsibility for neighbours. Is there any hope of such values becoming widely shared? In the light of these values and current social reality, what practical steps can policymakers, community practitioners and citizens take if they want to strengthen communities? The book will conclude with the author's manifesto for community development.

[Bibliography](#)

Publications and Internet resources

[Top of page](#)

Preface

As the twentieth century comes to a close a new political orthodoxy seems to be emerging on both sides of the Atlantic. The political philosophy of communitarianism, made popular on both sides of the Atlantic by Etzioni and the Communitarian Network in the USA, and by the Demos think tank in the UK is being taken up in sound-bites if not so clearly in policy, by politicians of Left and Right. As a middle way between the individualism of the free market ideology of the 1980s and the failed state collectivism of the Soviet Empire it has much to recommend it, both electorally and in terms of local action. In the trinity of virtues of the French revolution the emphasis is placed neither on liberty nor equality but on "fraternity" or as we might translate it into less sexist language "solidarity". The key attraction is in the warm glow of the word "community", for it is a brave person who contests the desirability of a term which speaks of belonging, locality, social harmony and co-operation.

However while it is easy to be broadly supportive of the communitarian vision it remains necessary to pose some critical questions. Is there not a danger that "community" can be used ideologically as the emphasis on solidarity serves to mask the citizen's loss of liberty and reduced chances of equality? There are questions, too, about the emphasis on responsibilities and civic duties as opposed to rights, and about the possibility of common core values in the context of plural, fragmented urban society. Is it possible to "(re)build community" in the postmodern world where local neighbourhood belonging and class consciousness is being replaced by individually selected and flexible identities which often transcend geography?

This book aims to explore the concept of "community" and "communitarianism" from a variety of perspectives including those of classical sociological theory, the tradition of community studies, social network analysis, and current debates on social policy and community development. The discussion is set in the context of the rapidly emerging global information society and the millennial sense of crisis which has been called by some "the end of history" but which can more modestly be described as the collapse of modernity.

The book emerges from the author's experience of twenty years of community work and social research in an inner city part of London. In that time I have worked on research projects which raise questions about the concept of community in a (post)modern urban setting, and which address policy issues in community development, the voluntary sector and care in the community. The book arose from the author's concern to set such applied research and community involvement in an adequate theoretical framework, and to help colleagues grapple with some of the important underlying issues which shape the context of their work. It is informed by an extensive reading of the academic literature in the field of community studies. However there is no intention to cover in any great detail the growing philosophical and political literature around the concept of communitarianism.

The title is problematic. The book is fundamentally a critical introduction to the concept of community rather than a guide to the philosophy and politics of communitarianism. The themes of "brother's keeper" and "who is my neighbour?" are as old as the Bible and are thoroughly covered in a century of sociological literature. However it is the importance of communitarianism in the late 1990's that make the book timely and relevant. I suggest one should hyphenate the title thus "community - arianism", and hope that any theologically literate reader will spot a cheeky reference to an ancient Christian heresy! However, I make no claim to the status of Athanasius, and one should not expect the conclusion of the study to be an authoritative credal orthodoxy setting a framework for belief and action for the next two millennia. My response to communitarianism will be questioning and provisional, and the dialogue with it will be something of a love-hate relationship. As we shall see, values drawn from the historical and Biblical Christian tradition will be far from irrelevant to the discussion.

The book, like others in the series is intended as an introductory text aimed at undergraduate sociologists / social scientists / urban geographers. It should also be of value to community professionals (such as social workers, health visitors, planners, community workers, clergy etc.) especially during initial training or on postgraduate taught courses. Policy makers, local government officers and community activists would also find it valuable.

I would like to thank my employers Aston Charities Trust for allowing me to set aside the time needed for writing this book and for sponsoring much of the research on which it is based. Various academic friends and colleagues have contributed ideas in informal discussions and correspondence over the years. Foremost among them are David Lyon, Bob Holman, Keith White, and Ken Leech. My links with the University of East London have been important in providing library and computing resources, and access to Census data. Much of the original research referred to has only been possible because of the unpaid help of various students on placement from the university and also from the London Hospital Medical College, as well as the local volunteers who have helped as interviewers in numerous community surveys.

I also wish to thank the people of Newham, especially those who have responded to innumerable questionnaires and interviews, and among whom I have lived and worked for so many years. In particular I owe a debt of gratitude to the network of neighbours in Claude Road and the Christian community in the neighbourhood which supports our family life, in situations ranging from the emotional stress of a child's illness to the practical tasks of feeding Judy Rabbit and Winnie Guinea Pig when we are on holiday. Finally I need to thank my family, Jane, Marcus and Martha, not forgetting Hannah from next door who has in a special way introduced me to new dimensions of the concept and practice of community.

[Top of page](#)

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<http://www.communities.org.uk/greg/gsum.html>