
"Community - arianism"

Chapter Seven: Communities of identity

- [Communities of identity](#)
- [Ethnicity](#)
- [Language and identity](#)
- [Religion and community](#)
- [Other communities of identity](#)
- [On the notion of fragmentation](#)
- [Back to contents](#)

Communities of identity

In the previous chapter we moved towards the conclusion that, whatever the results of network analysis in terms of the number and nature of links between people in the contemporary urban world, local neighbourhood community ties are not as important as they were in earlier ages. However other forms of networking flourish and it is to these communities of interest, attachment or identity that we now turn. Such communities without propinquity may take many forms, and individuals may be involved in and identify with two or more discrete or overlapping networks. One striking feature about such communities, when compared with the traditional *Gemeinschaft* model is that belonging and identity are to a great extent matters of individual choice. In the post modern world even community can become a commodity, which if not always easily marketable, is deeply influenced by the ethos of consumerism.

The world in which numerous overlapping or discrete communities and networks co-exist is often described as a plural society and the set of values and political arrangements which encourage it to flourish as pluralism. It is of course new technologies and the process of globalisation that has led to such plural societies in most (post)modern cities. Capital and information can be moved around the world instantaneously at the push of a few keys on a computer terminal. Decisions made, allegedly in response to the unseen hand of market forces, have massive impacts on the lives of millions of powerless people in particular local neighbourhoods throughout the world. Cheap exploited labour in the East Asia, is mirrored by high levels of unemployment in once industrial areas such as East London. Poverty and civil war in Uganda and Somalia, made possible by Western arms suppliers, produce refugees who arrive in East London, putting extra strain on housing, education and social services.

Rapid air transport means that more people than ever before are moving around the world seeking their fortunes, or simply security and freedom from fear. Increased long distance migration means that urban neighbourhoods contain increasingly diverse populations, who can continue to maintain occasional face to face, and more frequent phone, contact with friends and relatives in different parts of the world, as well as daily interaction with a cosmopolitan range of neighbours. As a result the most obvious common manifestation of the plural society is ethnic diversity, where groups of people with ancestral and/or cultural roots which were traditionally isolated from each other, rub shoulders within a single polity. Pluralism embraces diversity that goes beyond ethnicity, but we shall concentrate for now on ethnicity and community, before turning to language, religion and sub-cultures.

[Start of Chapter Seven](#) | [Contents](#)

Ethnicity

In multiethnic cities, using the concept of community is fraught with ambiguities and political dangers. Where a neighbourhood has received migrants from different cultural backgrounds the longer established (usually in the British context white working class people) are likely to feel their territory has been invaded and that the culture and bonds of their traditional community has been eroded. Such fears were played on by Conservative politicians such as Enoch Powell in 1968 and Margaret Thatcher in her 1978 "swamping" speech. If the incomers are black, the racist myths of white superiority are easily evoked, social boundary fences between the ethnic groups will be built and conflicts over scarce resources of housing, employment and education will arise. The opportunity for fringe fascist / Nazi political groups will be greatest when the indigenous community is close knit (and has *Gemeinschaft* characteristics), where the deprivation they endure is at its worst and when large scale neighbourhood change is being imposed from the outside, for example in London Docklands in the early 1990's. (Husband 1994)

At the same time minorities, whether they like it or not will be labeled by the majority as "communities". Indeed hostility and discrimination from the dominant / majority group (Cooper & Qureshi 1993) may well have the effect of strengthening community relationships and ethnic identity where previously they were weak. Arguably the growing significance of Islam as a marker of ethnic / community identity in Britain is a result of this process (Samad 1994, Knott & Khoker 1993). Although the dominant group may wish to lump all the newcomers together as "them" or to see minorities in terms of a small number of fixed categories which perceived as permanent groups (e.g. the Asian Community, the Chinese Community), networks among minority and migrant groups are more likely to be in a state of flux (Saifullah Khan 1982, Smith 1983). Boundary definition and community building will be an ongoing process and may never be resolved to everyone's satisfaction. For example some black people (mostly younger political radicals) wish to define all people from ethnic minorities as members of a single "black community" on the basis of a shared experience of racist oppression (NMP 1991). Others (mostly older, conservative, Asians) tend to define their community in terms of nationality, language spoken, and religion, ultimately based on the categories of the South Asian caste system (Modood 1992, Modood et al. 1994). Still others feel happy to negotiate the boundaries of their ethnicity, and will claim to belong to various communities and groups, according to the context, and with varying degrees of commitment (Barth 1969 Wallman 1978). This puts into question the validity of community studies like some of those mentioned in the previous chapter where a reified ethnic minority community is taken as a well defined unit of analysis.

A range of different markers can be used singly or in combination to define the boundaries of a group or community and these can be applied either by outsiders or insiders. Skin colour or other physical features are the most obvious and visible markers, and have been used to categorise, label and discriminate against people almost since time began. In the most extreme form, as in the Apartheid pass book system such distinctions were imposed by the State and had legal force and consequences. In the U.K. quasi-experimental research using actors matched in every respect except skin colour has been used many times, alongside survey evidence to show that black people are frequently discriminated against when presenting themselves in person in search of employment, housing or other services (Brown 1984, Jones 1993).

[Start of Chapter Seven](#) | [Contents](#)

Language and identity

Language is one of the most interesting and sophisticated system for marking social difference. As long ago as the Old Testament book of Judges (chap 12.6) a distinction based on nothing more than the

pronunciation of a single sound, "s" or "sh" in the word "shibboleth", had fatal consequences for those who got it wrong. In Britain many regional and class identities are marked, with varying degrees of pride or stigma, by relatively small variations in pronunciation within the English language. Sometimes it is the use of a single word or idiom that betrays or signals a persons identity, at others it is switching to an entirely different language.

In Wales, the Hebrides, Belgium, Brittany, Catalonia and the Basque country, to name just a few European regions, it is the ability to speak a minority language, and the decision to use it that defines the boundaries of the local community. In more fluid urban societies maintaining a heritage language, such as Spanish in New York, Italian in Toronto, Greek in Melbourne, Japanese in Sao Paolo, Gujerati in Leicester or Polish in Bradford is often vital to community identity and preservation of the culture (LMP 1985). However the battle is often a difficult one as new generations are born, especially in Anglophone cities, given the world dominance of English and its ubiquity in the mass media. In some contexts the writing system rather than the language itself becomes the boundary marker of a community. In North India there are minimal differences between the spoken forms of Hindi and Urdu, and native speakers of the two varieties have no great difficulty in mutual comprehension. Yet the scripts are totally different, and the written languages diverge greatly in their vocabulary. Urdu is the marker of Muslim, and since partition, Pakistani identity while Hindi is denotes membership of the Hindu community (Mobbs 1981). A similar situation over language exists in former Yugoslavia, with Serbs, Croats and Muslims speaking a mutually comprehensible language, but Serbs using the Cyrillic rather than the Roman alphabet.

The sociolinguistic literature is replete with studies of the notion of how language forms unite or divide groups of people. South Asia provides some of the most interesting examples (Shapiro & Schiffman 1981). Some sociolinguists have related choice of language or variation in speech forms to social network structure (Gal 1979, Milroy 1980) as well as to the more conventional sociological categories of race, class, and gender (Labov 1972, Trudgill 1974). The importance of this work for our present concerns is that much of it centres round the problematic of speech community (LMP 1985 p 128 -133). Because of the immense flexibility and creativity within language it is extremely difficult to define a speech community by setting boundaries. Does a speech community end at the point where a person begins to drop their h's, or when a listener fails to understand 90% of what the speaker is saying, perhaps for an Londoner in Glasgow. Even in the case of a distinct language, e.g. Welsh there are plenty of examples of borrowed English words and phrases, code switching and mixing and always the possibility of bilingualism or interpreters. In one sense a speech community could include the whole world, in another it is me alone. Once again network analysis appears more helpful than categorising the world by boundaries.

[Start of Chapter Seven](#) | [Contents](#)

Religion and community

Religion too, can and has been a powerful boundary marker between communities. In the some of the best known cases such as Belfast, Beirut and Bosnia historic religious divisions have led to segregation, hostility and bloodshed. Often the mere label of Protestant or Catholic, Muslim or Christian, regardless of any level of values, belief or religious activity has been enough to make innocent bystanders the victims of murder. In India since earliest times group boundaries have been marked on the basis of religion. Communities have been defined not only as Muslims, Sikh, Christian or Hindu, but within Hinduism in particular and among the other faiths by transference the caste system has segregated people in their place of residence, in the work they were expected to do and above all in defining possible marriage partners. All this was given an explicit religious legitimation, and even today both in India and in the diaspora, caste remains an important dimension of discrimination, and underlies many examples of communal tension and conflict (Burllett & Reid 1995, Lyon & West 1995).

Partly in reaction to the suffering caused by religious conflict in Early modern Europe the liberal Enlightenment tradition has valued toleration above all else, and has suggested that religion is a private matter for the individual. Since the claims of religion are not easily settled by public or "scientific" discourse, it does not matter what an individual believes, or how s/he worships, providing no serious harm is done to others. At the present time there are increased fears among liberals in the West because of the emergence of extreme forms of fundamentalism in Christianity, Islam and Judaism which have been highlighted by the bombing of abortion clinics, the fatwa on Salman Rushdie and the assassination of Yitzak Rabin.

Yet from a communitarian viewpoint it can be argued that the best hope for communities to flourish is through religious groupings. This should not be surprising if one recognises the importance of Bund structures. Elective communities can be the building blocks from which a more integrated (whole) society can be constructed. Attitudes and skills acquired in the safe context of a religious community can be profitably transferred to citizen involvement in public life. Religion (etymologically from a Latin term meaning "to bind") is by its nature an integrating force. In traditional society, as analysed by Durkheim (1915) the function of religion was seen to be legitimation for traditional social norms and the basis of solidarity. Even in the modern city, religion builds community in at least three different ways. First its teachings provide ultimate sacred anchor points which are shared by believers, despite differences of class, gender, race and personality. Secondly it provides in most cases a system of moral values, which covers a person's social obligations. In many of the World faiths there are commandments or exhortations to respect, love and care for neighbours, who are in some cases defined inclusively as all people in the world. In best practice these precepts are worked out in compassionate service both within the group and to the wider community. Thirdly in most religions people meet on a regular basis for worship, ritual or celebration. Here the shared sense of belonging and identity is enhanced, and there is space for building and strengthening networks of acquaintance, friendship, kinship, mutual obligation and economic exchange. Thus religion is intrinsically communitarian in spirit, sometimes admittedly at the expense of values of liberty and equality.

In post-modern plural societies religion for some people is the vestigial glue of a traditional society which has broken down or been transferred and reestablished in a new country. For others it is more about personal beliefs, morals and spirituality, a matter of choice in the supermarket of value systems. But in both cases it offers the possibility of believing and belonging, of finding personal meaning and social identity. (Davie 1994) It would, however, seem unlikely that the diverse and conflicting religious systems and groups in current urban settings can find enough in common to integrate the community as a whole. In some cases the sectarian tendency to exclude and demonise non-believers, and the desire to use religion as a mechanism of political domination, needs to be challenged. But in the absence of other strong local networks and collectivities, religion has an important and growing role in social and political life.

For example, in East London, where secular movements such as the Labour Party, the Trade Unions, and even the Neighbourhood Watches have failed or are struggling, the churches, mosques and temples are beginning to grow. There are now some 275 religious groups in a single borough, about 200 of which are congregations, and 160 recognisably Christian churches. The involvement of religious organisations and people in "community projects" and in the networks of public life is highly significant. It is estimated that out of a population of 217,000 people over 15,000 attend church, a rate that stands alongside the national average for England after a century when religious practice in such urban areas was constantly around a third of the national rates (Marchant 1986). There are also at least 25,000 Muslims among whom 75% of adult males claim to be regular attenders at a mosque, around 20,000 Hindus and 5,000 Sikhs (Aston CIU 1994, Smith 1996a). It may even be the case that the process of secularisation as usually understood is coming to an end.

There is some evidence too that religious groups are becoming a haven for the marginalised, as they cater for and attract far greater proportions of ethnic minority and refugee groups, and white newcomers to churches are as likely to be income support claimants as respectable employed traditional families. Churches and other religious groups have a long tradition of charity towards the poor, and of standing up

for social justice. The black Christian communities which grew out of the experience of slavery and segregation have still a profound role in Black American culture, to which the influence of Black Muslim movements has added. (Scherer 1972 p57). These movements also have influence in black communities in Britain. The new Catholic theologies of liberation, and the example of religious involvement in politics given by Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu have also made an impact. Where local congregations become home for the socially excluded, for the poor and the refugee solidarity and mutual help usually grow. Increasingly the notion of community is linked to religion, indeed defined by it. In Christian theology there has been a renewed interest in ecclesiology, focussed around notions of community derived from the New Testament (Banks 1980, Boff 1986). Local congregations of varying theologies from Roman Catholic to Pentecostal are becoming more participatory and consciously developing an extended family ethos (Smith 1988). Scherer's (1972) case study of an affluent suburban parish which she saw has held together more by a common conservative middle class culture, than by shared religious commitment, as an organisation facing an identity crisis, seems quaintly outdated. There is no way the urban church or the other faith communities can ignore or neglect the task of building, managing and living community, even if it wanted to. The crucial point for debate is whether such religious communities construct clear boundaries and become inward looking, or whether they seek to relate to, serve, evangelise and influence the wider population in their locality. Nor can secular policy makers safely ignore the religious dimension in dealing with "community" issues and implementing community policies. In particular as Harris (1995) has pointed out congregations form an important base for the practice of community care.

There is however another contradictory trend in modern religion, especially in the charismatic Christian and New Age variety. Here the emphasis is on the privatisation of religious experience. The problems to be solved are largely personal and psychological ones, about happiness, the authentic self, and spiritual and material blessing. Arguably the concern is with magic rather than religion. (Hamilton 1995) as techniques of prayer, meditation and healing take precedence over the search for God, and love of neighbour "out there". Salvation becomes a consumer commodity and in the supermarket of religions syncretism, or pick and mix personalised faith systems are commonplace. Such religion is the antithesis of communitarianism; if the church or religious community has any place at all it is only the place to discover ones true self, or meet congenial like minded friends.

Whether the private or community mode of religion dominates in years to come one thing is certain. There will be no return to the days of medieval Christendom, or achievement of the hope of an Islamic world society, in which the whole of society is united in a single religious community. Religious expression and the range of organisations expressing it will be increasingly diverse. There will be no single value base shared by all in any village or street, let alone across a nation state. The challenge for communitarians is to build on the strength of religious communities, to establish collaborative networks between them and to build on any common interests and values they have for the benefit of public life as a whole.

[Start of Chapter Seven](#) | [Contents](#)

Other communities of identity

As the twentieth century comes to a close traditional class and national identities play a less important role in social organisation and political mobilisation. Alongside more open personal networks, new social movements are constantly being born and for some people these become a focus for some participants not only for political action but for fundamental identity and belonging. Although many people take regard such movements simply as one of many interests in their lives, and the relationships they make within them as one section of their personal networks, for others the movement becomes a primary community.

Of course it does not need to be a political or social movement as such for communities of identity to form. Obsessive personalities find meaning and belonging in communities of interest as diverse as sports clubs, model railway societies, music groups and psychiatric group therapy. Youth sub-cultures are of particular interest, and extremely diverse (Hebdidge 1979). They mark the boundaries of their community, which is often fairly homogeneous in terms of age, race and social class by fashions of appearance, styles of music, behaviour and language, which are often met by the incomprehension if not horror of their parents' generation.

Of particular note among the social movements are greens, disabled people, feminists and gays. Environmental concern has made an impact throughout the Western world across many of the boundaries of age and class. Elderly middle class bird watchers, working class inner city parents, and student anarchists have a common interest in such issues as reducing pollution from car exhausts, and the "rights" of farm animals. Moderates and radicals may disagree as to methods, but the common cause is often recognised as a form of community. At the radical end of the spectrum action on the issues may lead to the formation of an intentional or residential community, for example in tree houses obstructing the passage of bull dozers for a new motorway or in the case of the women anti-nuclear protesters camped at Greenham common in the 1980s (Dominelli 1995). Such communities often develop high levels of solidarity, and explicit shared value systems, which have more than a tinge of the religious.

Feminism has grown as a self conscious movement over recent years and has achieved much in terms of the conscientisation of women, if as yet somewhat less in changing patterns of male domination in most spheres of society. For all women in some circumstances and for some feminists in almost all circumstances gender is seen as an uncrossable boundary marker. Some feminist groups it seems wish to exclude men from every aspect of their lives. Despite feminist sympathies for communitarian theories and praxis, (Frazer & Lacey 1993) it is not however usual to hear the word "community" applied to feminist or women only collectives. Solidarity is more likely to be expressed in terms of sisterhood. Is it perhaps the case that "community" is to be rejected as a male defined term? Or is it rather that the everyday usage of the term has so many irremovable connotations of family, of a social organisation in which the raising of the next generation is of paramount importance therefore demanding at least some degree of collaboration between male and female for the purpose of procreation? The feminist critique of "community care" may in part derive from such a deconstructive approach to the ideology of community.

In contrast the gay and lesbian movement has vigorously embraced the term community in its politics of identity. Until the 1960's homosexuality in most Western societies was seen as deviant and its practice was illegal. If a community existed it was in the form of semi-covert informal networks. Decriminalisation and greater tolerance in recent years has allowed a movement to organise in public, and many individuals to "come out". In some cities particular neighbourhoods have become segregated enclaves for gay residents, while most urban areas now have publicly listed gay and lesbian clubs, publications and voluntary support groups. Gay pride festivals are now commonplace. Looked at from the outside boundary definition is problematic, far more so for example than with the women's movement. What are the criteria for membership of the gay community? If it is living in a homosexual partnership many would be permanently excluded and some would move in and out of the community. If it is a single incident of homosexual practice in a lifetime some people would be included who would deny their membership. Homosexual orientation is probably more a matter of degree than category, and in any case is not essentially publicly observable. Public identification with the community, "coming out", is perhaps the clearest guide, but would still exclude people who are convinced as to their sexuality, but are not yet prepared to bear the stigma of confessing it in public. The case of the gay and lesbian community yet again illustrates the mistake of re-ifying a community by marking its boundaries. A more satisfactory picture is that of network with a dense core and more loosely connected periphery. It illustrates perhaps better than any other contemporary case that communities, can be and are socially constructed, for ideological purposes, and as collective responses to perceived oppressions.

The definition of disability is contested so, determining the boundaries of the "community" of disabled people is intrinsically difficult. However, according to the recent Health Survey for England 1991 around

40% of the population reported themselves to have a long-standing illness or disability while the General Household Survey of 1993 found 8% of respondents to have a mobility problem (White et al 1993, Foster et al 1995). In recent years there has been a major transformation of identity for many, that parallels that of gay and lesbian people. In place of medical definitions of handicap and impairment and charitable responses based on pity activists have demanded equal recognition as members of society. They have pointed for example that barriers to employment are not so much the inabilities of disabled people but the stigmatising attitudes of able bodied society, and the unsuitability of buildings, equipment and rigid work patterns. Campaigns have focussed on physical access, higher social security benefits to improve mobility and care, and on the right to choose appropriate models of medical and social support. The language used has not been so much about the disabled community, as about the right of disabled people to play a full role in the wider community, and about the implications of the term care in the community. There has been an effective process of conscientisation, at least at the core of the movement. For example Newham's leading local movement on disability is called Action and Rights of Disabled People and insists that all decisions taken about its activities are taken by disabled people themselves. In the wake of the disability rights movement Carers, the usually female kin, who look after elderly and disabled people have also demanded recognition, in campaigns which often resonate with some of the demands of the women's movement.

[Start of Chapter Seven](#) | [Contents](#)

On the notion of fragmentation

The emergence of so many communities of identity in contemporary society suggests an increasing complexity in the organisation of the world. People can be grouped into a growing range of categories according to ethnicity, gender, place of residence, religion, patterns of consumption and much more. Fragmentation is a common way of describing this breaking down of the social order. Without wishing to invoke any conspiracy theories, it does seem plausible that the processes of fragmentation and privatisation are functional within capitalism, in that they render mass organisation of opposition to global business and the ruling political elites of nation states that more difficult. "Workers of the world unite" is no longer a very effective slogan.

It is however questionable whether the fragmentation process is leading to a breakdown of society in the alarmist sense of the phrase. For although some people do find their primary sense of identity and belonging in a fragmentary form of community other forces work to bind people together into greater collective structures. In the first place the majority of people can be categorised in a large number of overlapping social fragments and play a range of roles at different times of their life. Thus I am a man, a father, a husband, a Christian, a white person, a socialist, a cyclist, a researcher, a community worker, a West Ham supporter, a bird watcher and a steam train enthusiast. But none of those roles, relationships and categories can be used alone to denote my complex identity. Secondly, most people have network connections which inevitably bind them into wider society; economic ties as employee and consumer, social ties of friendship and kinship, political ties as citizen or subject. The whole post modern world is thus inextricably connected as a massive network of interdependency.

One of the themes of the debate on postmodernity which we have already referred to has been the growing possibilities of individual choice not only in consumer goods, but in cultural forms and even identities. New modes of industrial production have introduced flexibility in product specifications, no longer in these post-Fordist times are consumers offered cars in "any colour as long as it's black". Within broad general constraints, consumers are overwhelmed with choice, sub-cultures spring up and mark their boundaries by styles of fashion or music, and manufacturers make huge profits from selling images and designer labels. In some settings consumers can be shown to define their personal identities and values by their relationship to the choices they make in purchasing. Unlike the period of mass affluence in the

1960's when "keeping up with the Jones's" was the watchword, conspicuous consumption in the 1990's revels in difference, especially in the consumption of arts and leisure products.

The notion of pick and mix culture is easily understood and can obviously be applied to the issue of multiple, overlapping and flexible identities and community attachments (Lyon 1994). But just as the poor are excluded from most of the opportunities of the market place, simply because they have no money to purchase any of the wide range of consumer goods on offer, so a large number of people are excluded from choice about the communities they belong to. Rich and educated people can use their purchasing power to move from one residential neighbourhood to a "better" one while the poor are condemned to remain in deprived municipal housing estates, remote rural areas, shanty towns or even on the streets. Rich and educated people can travel the world, learn new languages and skills, and associate with whichever networks of people or communities of common interest they choose. Meanwhile poor and less educated people are on the whole less mobile and have to get on with the business of relating to the neighbourhood communities where they happen to be. In the cases where they do move as migrant labour or as refugees they still have little choice but relate within the ethnic community in which they are perceived to belong, both for mutual practical and cultural support, and as a defense against the hostility of the majority community. The same applies to other less powerful fragments within society; children, older people, disabled people and the mentally ill. For these groups belonging and community is given rather than chosen. This of course brings us back to a key question; can "community" in any meaningful sense of the term ever be chosen, or are as Sennett (1977a 1977b) argued, private and narcissistic forms of Gemeinschaft inherently destructive?

In the next chapter we will spend some time looking at the contradictory social trends that work on the one hand for fragmentation and on the other towards unification of the contemporary world. Globalisation of the market economy, and the spread of a global culture through the electronic media is the major force imposing a shared experience on increasing proportions of the world's population. The emerging information society is one in which the key concept is the network, global and unbounded. However the increasingly interactive nature of communication networks at the same time promotes diversity, choice and fragmentation. And as we shall see, both within the high priestly class of Internet wizards, and among the masses who are likely to be excluded from the world of cyberspace, more traditional concepts of community refuse to lie down and die.

[Start of Chapter Seven](#) | [Contents](#)
