COMPREHENDING COMMUNITY

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Abstract

The concept of "community" has a chequered history, in the course of which it has inverted its sense, from meaning a *general* group to meaning a very *particular* group. In current usage, its sense remains diverse, retaining many historical uses, but also acquiring a *weak* usage (meaning "people" or "the public"), as well as a *strong* usage (meaning a group with some form of intrinsic identity). From a Foucauldian perspective, these latter may be understood as strategic alliances, challenging government and domination, and taking the form of *original* communities or *local* communities or *vocational* communities. "Community," as term and as strategy, is a technique of power.

What do we mean by *community*? If "the meaning of a word is its use in language," as Wittgenstein would have it (Wittgenstein, 1963: para43), then we must ask, *how* do we use the word "community?" But Wittgenstein's approach prompts two further questions – *who* uses the word, and *why*?

We may begin by considering the history of the usage of the term (cf. Williams, 1983). "Community" is a modern word, and its history traces tensions between senses of domination and subordination, of generality and intimacy. It has its origins in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when it was incorporated into late Middle English. Its adoption was concurrent with terms like "public" and "private," "nation" and "state," "civil" and "society," significantly all from the governing languages of Latin and French. These terms were articulating the development of what might be called a *horizontal* conception of social organisation. The vertical, feudal world of personal alliance was being replaced by the social strata of the emerging nation-state. In its earliest uses, "community" referred either to an *organised body* of people, large or small (as in *religious community*, meaning *monastery* or *convent*), or to the common people, the *commonalty* within such a body, those who were governed. It was distinct from "society," which then meant *companionship*.

In the Renaissance of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as the mercantile stratum grew stronger, new conceptions of self and others developed. Hence, the use of "community" shifted from *people* to their *relationships*. It could refer to *common ownership* ("anabaptists that hold *community* of goods"), or *social communion* ("men have a certain *community* with God in this world"), or *common identity* ("the points of *community* in their nature").[1]

The Medieval and Renaissance senses merged in the Modern era of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and "community" began referring to *the people of a district or neighbourhood*. In the context of larger and more complex social development, urban and industrial, a contrary sense of immediacy and locality emerged. "Community" and "society" transposed their original meanings. The rationalists redeployed "society," which acquired its modern abstract and general sense of *a system of common life*. By contrast, the romantics used "community" to refer to a *significant local human network*. "The contrast, increasingly expressed in C19, between the more direct, more total and therefore more significant relationships of *community* and the more formal, more abstract and more instrumental relationships of *state*, or of *society* in its modern sense, was influentially formalised by Tönnies (1887) as a contrast between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*" (Williams, 1983: 76). The ground for the present deployment of "community" was laid.

The history of "community" therefore is complex. The complexity continues in present-day usage. Currently, uses survive from every stage of the term's history. We still refer to religious organisations as "communities," as they did in the Middle Ages. (And we recently belonged to the *European Community*, now the European Union.) As in the Renaissance, we can refer, for instance, to "a tremendous *community* of purpose among the groups."[2] But the dominant sense of "community" persists from the Modern period, the idea of community as the network of significant relationships among a localised group of people.[3] This sense has been seized upon and given prominence, for example, in the government's policy of *Sustainable Communities*: "communities are more than just housing, they have many requirements... economically, socially and environmentally" (ODPM, 2003). However, such use of the term by authority not un-naturally gives rise to

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[1] Historical examples are taken from *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1944).

[2] Current examples are mostly taken from *British National Corpus* (1995).

[3] This sense may be extended metaphorically, as in "trees or shrubs carefully selected for their usefulness in supporting a diverse wildlife community."

suspicion. And there are instances of fairly clear abuse. A case in point is another (former) government policy, *care in the community*. "It has long been argued by feminist critics that "community care" is merely a euphemism for care by the family – which in turn means care by women."[4]

In fact, there are two major divergences from the traditional, romantic notion of community, both related to issues of control, and both returning (in different ways) to the earliest notion of community as the commonalty, the common people. One of these divergences effectively uses "community" as a synonym for "people," with the "warmly persuasive" connotations noted by Williams. In this sense, "community" is used in three increasingly specific ways. First, "community" may be used very broadly as an alternative to "general public" – for instance, "it's for government to regulate on behalf of the *community*." Secondly, and very commonly, "community" may refer to the inhabitants of a particular area. An instance was the infamous *Community Charge* (or Poll Tax), which was simply a charge levied on the residents in general of each local authority. A third usage is more specific still. "Community development," or even more "community action" or "community regeneration," refer to local populations who may benefit from *development* or *action* or *regeneration* – who are thus by implication disadvantaged in some degree.[5] All these uses endeavour to take advantage of, and exploit, the connotations of "community." None however entail the significant intrinsic networks of the romantic concept. And all are inherently paternalist (top-down) in their usage, they differentiate between those with greater and lesser power. These uses may be characterised as a *weak* sense of community.

The other major divergence from the romantic concept works in the opposite direction, and is grounded in a *strong* sense of the term. It is bottom-up and "polemical" (in Williams' term). It is used in a general sense in the notions of "community politics" or "community arts" or "community

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[4] The romantic sense of "community" may now be honoured more in the breach than in the observance. This is one of the implications of Bauman (2001): he furnishes a number of characterisations of this romantic concept, by Tönnies ("an understanding shared by all its members," p. 10), by Redfield ("distinctive, small, self-sufficient," p. 12), by Dench ("the fraternal obligation... to share benefits among their members, regardless of how talented or important they are," p. 58). In the long term, the romantic idea of community may turn out to be temporary; the term was indeed used for four centuries without any of the modern "warmly persuasive" connotations (Williams, 1983: 76). See also Delanty (2003).

[5] *Community investment*, according to Business in the Community, has to "benefit charities or not-for-profit organisations representing economically and socially disadvantaged groups" (Guardian, 2003: 7).

relations." In these cases, the term is adopted by the participants themselves (or their advocates), *against* paternal authority; and it *does* stake a claim to significant intrinsic networks (it also trades on the warmly persuasive connotations). Thus, *community politics* is about bottom-up empowerment, and *community arts* is about spontaneous, non-canonical creative action, and *community relations* is about justice for marginalised groups (as for example, in the former *Community Relations Council*).[6] Here, "community" is making a play for power.

This usage occurs also in a specific sense, to refer to particular groups. Its polemical use here is to stake a claim to identity. One of the strongest of these is the claim by people of a locality to their own distinct identity. Frequently this is independent of, and often contrary to, notions of community imposed by authority, and it is manifest especially in the formation of local *community associations*. Another strong use of the term is made by groups asserting identity, not on the grounds of locality, but in terms of some form of common origin. The most common of these is the idea of *ethnic community* (for example, Caribbean or Gujerati communities).[7] But this sense of community may also be adopted by groups with other shared, inherited characteristics (working-class, deaf communities). A third (more recent) development, modelled on these uses, asserts the identity of groups diverse in location or origin, but common in their commitment or vocation, such as *professional communities* (farming, scientific communities), or *faith communities* (Christian, Moslem communities), or *recreational communities* (gaming, rambling communities). Here, "community" is claiming recognition within the social system.

It is clear in fact that in *most* of its current uses, the term "community" is used in a polemic sense. Frequently, its users simply trade on its generally positive connotations: a *community notice board* may simply be one available to local people. But it may also be used in a more particular, hopefully persuasive sense by authority, as in *community service*, *community care*, *community policing*, *community workers*, *Community Health Councils*, and so on. On the other hand, it is also used assertively by the subordinated or those seeking recognition of their identity, like *community associations*,

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[6] "Community relations" in fact may be used in two ways: (a) here in the CRC, it is used in the strong sense, referring to groups with strong senses of identity; but (b) it may also be used in a weak sense, as in "community relations, such as involvement [by the police] with youth clubs, schools, etc.," referring to an institution's relations with the local population.

[7] There is an interesting contrast between "language community" (all who speak a particular language) and "community language" (the language spoken by a marginalised group).

ethnic communities, *professional communities*, etc. The former use by those wielding greater power has given rise to the weak sense of community, the latter by those with lesser power has developed its strong, romantic sense.

The *term* "community" therefore plays its part in power relations. So also do the *relationships* signified by the concept in its strong sense. In fact, Michel Foucault has argued for an approach to *power* as a matter of relationships. He has rejected the traditional notion of power as something which may be possessed, which is held by the few, and which is deployed negatively, as a prohibition on the many. On the contrary, he has argued that power is *pervasive*, that is, it is implicated in all our relationships, we are constantly engaged with others in tactics of power, whether at work or at home, or shopping or leisure. And power is *productive*, that is, it is a positive force in society. Foucault describes power as "action upon action" (Foucault, 2001: 340), the impact each of us has on what others do. Thus, everything we achieve with others is enabled by power relations.

Indeed, for Foucault, "power comes from below" (Foucault, 1979: 94). He says, "there are three levels to my analysis of power: strategic relations, techniques of government, and states of domination" (Foucault, 1997: 299). By "strategic relations," Foucault means individual confrontations, where "some try to control the conduct of others." By "techniques of government," he means "not only the way institutions are governed but also the way one governs one's wife and children." Foucault also calls institutions, like schools, hospitals or prisons, "power blocks." Finally, the "states of domination" are the "wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole." Foucault has in mind the dominations of class, gender and race.

To these levels, or rather between these levels, we should add "communities." In the tactics of our strategic relations, our daily micro-relationships, we constantly seek alliances, in order to control the conduct of others, or to avoid being controlled. These alliances may remain local and transient, like a group of neighbours in a street. But they may increase in scale and longevity, until at length they become power blocks, or techniques of government, for instance, as a faith community consolidates into a church. Or communities may sustain (or subvert) states of domination, as the gay community has done.[8] Communities then are *loose systems*, alliances of

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[8] In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault suggests that "the appearance in [the] nineteenth century... of a whole series of discourses on homosexuality... made possible a strong advance of social controls... but it also made possible the formation of a "reverse" discourse: homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that [it] be acknowledged" (Foucault, 1979: 101), in other words, the beginning of a gay community.

strategic relations, weaving between, linking and challenging, power blocks and dominations.

We can identify three aspects of the power relations in these loose alliances, or communities. They originate of course in *social networks*. Individual relationships (the grounds of power) interconnect, and these connections proliferate as a network of relationships. In a village, for example, everyone ends up by knowing everyone else. Such networks, in order to be sustained (to maintain their power) develop typical forms of behaviour, or *social norms*. Interests and values and practices are shared within the network. In the village, there are expectations of how everyone should behave (which may become stifling). Finally, the participants devise *social sanctions* to maintain these norms. Approval is accorded to those who sustain them well, disapproval to those who do not. The best in the village become local heroes, the worst may become scapegoats.[9]

These loose systems emerge from our most immediate relationships. In our modern culture, the most prominent of these are *family* and *friends* and *neighbours*. Each of these may serve as a catalyst or model for strategic alliances, for loose systems – or communities.

The family is the first community.[10] Born into a family, we inherit a ready-made network of relations; each family has its own micro-culture; each has its "blue-eyed boy" and its "black sheep." But there is no end to the family. Each in turn is related to others. Families form clans, clans become communities, eventually ethnic communities. Or caste or class communities. They are connected by a community of origin. Other networks may be grounded in perceived common origins, such as sexuality or disability (the gay community, the deaf community). The family then, with its social networks, social norms and social sanctions, is the model for what may be termed "original communities."

Unlike families, friends are chosen. Friends are introduced to other friends, and friendship networks are developed. Friends are found and made at work and play, for instance. Friends share interests and experiences, and common assumptions about behaviour. The ultimate sanction of course is ending the friendship. Such networks arise, not from common origins, but most often in pursuit of common goals – the vocational goals of a profession

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[9] These three features derive from the idea of *social capital*. Though this basic concept is anti-Foucauldian, its features lend themselves readily to Foucault's account of power. See Aldridge & Halpern (2002), and Field (2003).

[10] "The most ancient of all societies, and the only one that is natural, is the family," according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1955: 6). In fact, Rousseau's calculated, rational notion of the *social contract* articulates the modern conception of *society*, against which the emotive, romantic idea of *community* developed.

or trade, or the vocation of a voluntary cause or calling. Friends then (again comprising network, norms and sanctions) are the ground and model for "vocational communities."

Finally, we are surrounded by neighbours. We inherit our relations, we choose our friends. We find our neighbours (who may well become friends and relations). Neighbour networks arise from simple proximity, and they extend by means of adjacency. They develop norms of neighbourliness. Good neighbours are popular, bad neighbours are shunned. What these networks share is not the past or the future, but the present, the here and now – their shared space, social and geographical. Neighbours and neighbourhood networks, norms and sanctions are the ground of "local communities."

Original communities, local communities and vocational communities, oriented to past, present or future, are strategic alliances arising from different kinds of shared relationships. As each of us has family, friends and neighbours, so each of us (in the exercise of power) participates in a range of alliances or communities.

We are now perhaps in the era of Postmodern Community. The word "community" (in consequence of its history) is used in diverse (and conflicting) ways. No grand narrative holds them together – there is no *essential* community. At the same time, assertive (strong) communities are multifarious, and everyone participates in different kinds of communities, at different times and for different purposes. Clausewitz said, war is politics pursued by other means. Foucault reversed this: rather, politics is war pursued by other means, that is, by the exercise of power as opposed to the exercise of force (Foucault, 1980: 90). In this case, the use of "community," both the term and the strategy, is a weapon in that war.

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