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# Seeking Community in the City

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**Abstract:** For more than a century, western sociologists have expressed deep ambivalence toward the word ‘community’. Responding to an influential book by Ferdinand Tonnies, Durkheim first took issue with the topic by suggesting that urbanization would make the very idea of community anachronistic (Aldous *et al.* 1972). He also argued that city-dwellers would develop new forms of association and solidarity and preferred using terms—like ‘civil society’—which did not carry the same kind of past associations or emotional baggage as ‘community’. The trouble with this—as both Delanty (2003) and Esposito (2010) have since explained—is that ‘community’ has ancient roots in a number of European languages and touches on a perennial and ageless human desire to feel a sense of belonging within the much more diffuse notion of ‘society’. Moreover, this ageless human search to belong suggests we would struggle to avoid ‘community’ even if we wanted to, and that it has a broad and enduring appeal. As Anthony Cohen (1985) has suggested, the idea of community has enormous *symbolic* importance—even if it means different things to different people.

**Keywords:** Ambiguity, community, diversity, division, globalization, insiders, outsiders, urbanization.

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‘Engaging with community is a practice full of ambivalence, but always one full of hope.’

(Brent 2009, p. 261)

## 1. Ambivalence about community

For more than a century, western sociologists have expressed deep ambivalence toward the word ‘community’. Responding to an influential book by Ferdinand Tonnies, Emile Durkheim first took issue with the topic by suggesting that urbanization would make the very idea of community anachronistic (Aldous *et al.* 1972). He also argued that city-dwellers would develop new forms of association and solidarity and preferred using terms—like ‘civil society’—which did not carry the same kind of past associations or emotional baggage as ‘community’. The trouble with this—as both Delanty (2003) and Esposito (2010) have since explained—is that ‘community’ has ancient roots in a number of European languages and touches on a perennial and ageless human desire to feel a sense of belonging within the much more diffuse notion of ‘society’.

In the decades since Durkheim, many sociologists have complained that the word ‘community’ has many—sometimes contradictory—meanings. Cultural studies pioneer

Raymond Williams famously quipped (1983, p. 76) that the word ‘never seems to be used unfavourably [because it can be either] the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships or the warmly persuasive word used to describe an alternate set of relationships’. While Williams was rather bemused by the slippery nature of the word, feminist sociologist Iris Marion Young (1990) was savage when suggesting that it can be used as a mask for racism, in that, it can be used to create a sense of authenticity for some at the expense of others. In other words, it can be used to create categories *insiders* and *outsiders*. Closer to the sentiment of Williams was that of Australian sociologists Lois Bryson and Martin Mowbray (1981) who noted that talk of community tends to be used by politicians and policy-makers as a kind of ‘spray-on solution’ for societies with unresolved tensions and divisions. Yet, as Delanty (2003) and Esposito (2010) both argued, the fact that community represents an ageless human search for a sense of belonging means that we cannot avoid it even if we wanted to. It has broad and enduring appeal. It is not really surprising—yet worth noting—that it was an anthropologist in Anthony Cohen (1985) who helped to remind sociologists that the idea of community has enormous *symbolic* importance—even if it means different things to different people.

## 2. Impact of globalization

If the post-industrialization migration of people from the countryside to the city made old ideas about community anachronistic—as Durkheim argued—then the even bigger flows of people, goods, money, ideas and information—made possible by greatly enhanced transport and communication technologies—would surely represent an even bigger threat. Indeed some leading sociologists, such as Saskia Sassen (2006) and John Urry (2000 and 2003), have argued that local communities have become largely irrelevant. Indeed, both Sassen and Urry prefer the notion of the ‘network society’ as articulated by Manuel Castells (1996). Once again the suggestion emerged that the word ‘community’ had probably reached its use-by date and that other language may be needed to describe other forms of association.

Against this, Nikolas Rose (1996) has argued that uncertainties and unpredictabilities associated with globalization have actually increased the desire for community, partly because the more diffuse notion of society has not been able to deliver a sense of security. Having been a fierce critic of communitarianism, Zygmunt Bauman (2001) reached a similar conclusion, while Gerard Delanty (2003) went even further, to suggest that there are more opportunities than ever before to participate in community in the world of advanced communication technologies.

All the sociologists who have written on this topic seem to agree, that stable communities, which change little from one generation to another, no longer exist in a world of increased global flows. The existence of community at any level of society cannot be taken for granted and, indeed, a sense of community has to be consciously constructed. Gerard Delanty (2003) made an important argument, in saying that there is no need to counterpose local and non-local communities because a community—as distinct from something like a neighbourhood—exists only to the extent that it is talked about internally, and projected externally. We all know that there are many neighbourhoods—especially in cities—where there is little or no sense of community. Moreover, Delanty emphasizes communication in his discussion of the communicative construction of community. The implication is that, most people now have the opportunity to participate in the communicative construction of many communities: both ‘real’ (or embodied) and ‘virtual’. The danger here is that we may try to

spread ourselves too thinly and Delanty noted that many virtual communities are ephemeral and rather ‘thin’ in their significance for those involved.

An emphasis on the communicative construction of community in a world of global flows also makes distinctions between city and country irrelevant in regard to the presence or absence of community. There may be fewer and less overlapping communities in smaller and more dispersed human settlements compared to big cities, and it may be easier to delineate one community from another. But the need to have a sense of belonging to community is no less for people living in the city and the distinction between community and society, as expressed by Nikolas Rose (1996), may be even more sharply positioned for people living in cities. The creation of community may take more work within the flux and flow of urban life but the reward for effort, may indeed be greater.

### **3. Divisions and diversity**

Delanty’s (2003) emphasis on the communicative construction of community helps us understand how certain projections of community identity can exacerbate potential divisions by enabling some people to feel they belong, while also disabling this sense for others. Narrowly defined conceptions of community identity create categories of *insiders* and *outsiders*. This may not be a problem when it comes to the creation of virtual communities to which people can choose to belong or even special interest communities within broader local communities. However, it does become a problem when some people feel that they are being excluded from the communities they would like to belong to: especially if such people are left feeling that they are excluded or marginalized by all forms of community that should be available to them. There is plenty of room for the coexistence of many forms of community, some defined narrowly and specifically, while others are defined more broadly. However, the mix needs to cater for all and problems can erupt when there is no overarching sense of local community for people who live in close proximity to each other. Problems can also erupt when there is a contested sense of belonging based on religious or ethnic identities, even if they are not place-based.

The coexistence of diverse communities can make life more interesting for people living in tolerant societies and it is the existence of diversity which, in turn, can make societies more tolerant. However, intra-communal and intercommunal tensions can result in simmering resentments or overt violence as seen in places ranging from Bosnia and Sri Lanka to the streets of major cities in England and France. As Esposito (2010) explained, there is a rather desperate and sinister side to the desire for community and divisive conceptions of community need to be contested by those who value tolerance and peaceful coexistence. As well as being ‘warm and persuasive’, to quote Williams (1983), community can be dark and troublesome and it is in everyone’s interest to ensure that there is a place for all in the projection of coexisting communities. This can give more meaning to the rather bland policy notion of social inclusion.

### **4. Engaging with ambiguity**

Ambivalence about ambiguities within, and abuse of, the word community has led many to suggest alternative language. Durkheim preferred to talk of the emergence of ‘civil society’ while there has been growing interest in the concept of ‘social capital’, which appears to have

been mooted as long ago as 1916 (Putnam 2000, p. 19). For sociologists, the most influential rendition of the concept of ‘social capital’ came from Pierre Bourdieu in 1986. However, Bourdieu later made it clear that he promoted the term because he wanted to contest narrow ‘economism’ in the literature on social wellbeing. He expressed misgivings about instrumental use of the notion of social capital in an interview published in 1993 (p. 33) in which he said that ‘if there is one person for whom it’s a problem, it’s myself’. He went on to say that the term has rhetorical value in that it poses ‘fertile questions’ to those who think that social wellbeing can be reduced to economic opportunity but he made it clear that the term cannot be taken as a replacement for ‘sociability’ (*ibid*, p. 34). A number of scholars have argued that very little has come of the focus on ‘social capital’ (eg. Fine 2001, Smith and Kulynych 2002).

The books by Gerard Delanty (2003) and Roberto Esposito (2010) remind us that the search for a sense of belonging to community is a perennial part of what is sometimes rather quaintly called ‘the human condition’. Indeed, Esposito argued that there are gloomy aspects to this search, as the failure to find community, can be thought of as a ‘hole’ into which we ‘continually risk falling’ (2010, p. 8). This helps explain why there can be a desperate edge to the search for community; why it is often hotly contested; and why politicians and others want to be associated with any success in finding a sense of community, no matter how fleeting or ephemeral. Esposito (2010) and Delanty (2003) join with Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) in saying that the experience of community can never be fully achieved or completed. Delanty put this a little more positively than Nancy but they agree that community is best seen as a perennial aspiration, with ephemeral or partial experiences of the power of community being enough to keep the aspiration alive and burning. Nevertheless, Esposito argued that the search for community is the ‘sole dimension’ of what it means to be human because it is ‘constitutive of [our] co-living’ (2010, p. 8).

Words like ‘community’ can be frustrating because they are hard to define with any precision and can mean different things to different people. However, such words often tap into depths of human experience that are difficult to put into words. Community carries more layers of meaning and an emotional power that is missing from alternative terms such as ‘civil society’ or ‘social capital’ and we need to engage with the perennial desire for community—especially in a world of global flows—rather than turn to ‘safer’ but less evocative language.

## 5. Learning from practice

Those who feel inclined to steer clear of the word community should also acknowledge that community development has been a vibrant field of practice in countries such as United Kingdom, United States and Australia since the late 1960s. An international *Community Development Journal* was launched in the United Kingdom in 1968 and has reported on a wealth of experience and research ever since. Some of the founders of the journal marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its foundation by pulling together a selection of the most influential writing in order to show the field of practice has more relevance than ever (Craig *et al.* 2008).

Many local government authorities and a host of community-based organizations in Australia employ people to work explicitly in community development and many have now acquired several decades of experience working in this field. Community development seemed a novel concept when the author of this paper served on the Board of Management of an organization called South Sydney Community Aid in 1973. At that time community art was also a

fledgling field of practice in Australia and it seemed to have little to do with community development. The author was surprised to find a significant overlap between community development and community art, when he was the lead researcher on a research project for VicHealth between 2004 and 2006 (see Mulligan *et al.* 2006). That report showed that community development practice had come a long way since the early 1970s and yet many of the sociologists who write about community seem to be unaware of this.

The book by Jeremy Brent (2009) is an important one in the author's opinion because he spent 25 years as a community development worker in a public housing estate in Bristol before returning to university undertake postgraduate study at the University of Birmingham, where he eventually managed to complete his PhD. Brent's PhD was published, posthumously, as a book by some of his friends and associates. The book includes an impressive survey of the literature on community in a globalizing world, and while Brent acknowledges the many difficulties involved in trying to give the search for community real meaning, he ended his exploration with the statement used at the beginning of this paper:

'Engaging with community is a practice full of ambivalence, but also one full of hope' (Brent 2009, p. 261).

We cannot afford to leave community to those who might fill it with shallow or divisive meanings. It is something worth fighting for.

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