Community: The Career of a Concept

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Abstract: From both an empirical and theoretical perspective, "community" has arguably become an obsolete concept in the social sciences. People in contemporary society supposedly have lost their sense of community and the specialized field of community studies has been subjected to sustained criticism. Yet people still live in villages, towns and neighbourhoods; moreover, some of the best social science produced over the decades has been our community studies. A historical overview of the genre suggests that the one approach that has stood the test of time—at least until recently—has been methodological: the small community has been the perfect vehicle for the ethnographic enterprise. New forms of community, however, appear to have undermined the traditional community and possibly the utility of the methodological perspective as well.

Keywords: community, ecology, symbolism, methodology

Résumé : Dans une perspective théorique comme empirique, le concept de « communauté » est sans doute devenu désuet pour les sciences sociales. Il apparaît que les citoyens de la société contemporaine ont perdu le sens de la communauté, tandis que le domaine spécialisé des « études communautaires » fait l'objet de critiques répétées. Pourtant les gens continuent de vivre dans des villages, des villes et des quartiers; qui plus est, parmi les meilleures productions des sciences sociales au cours des dernières décennies, il faut compter nos études communautaires. Un survol historique du genre suggère qu'une dimension qui a bien passé le test du temps – du moins jusqu'à récemment – est l'approche méthodologique : la petite communauté est le véhicule idéal pour l'entreprise ethnographique. Mais de nouvelles formes de communautés semblent en voie de saper la communauté traditionnelle et peut-être même l'utilité de la perspective méthodologique.

Mots-clés : communauté, écologie, symbolisme, méthodologie

Two statements:
1. Efforts to define community and to build a body of theory around the concept have been a dismal failure.
2. But, some of the best social science produced over the past decades has been our community studies.

My aim will be to explain this apparent contradiction. I shall begin with an overview of the shifting character of the topic over time, especially the almost total concentration of early community studies in the industrialized West, the eventual links among community, culture and ethnicity, the decline of community studies because of conceptual confusion and the impact of social change and recent efforts to rework the genre theoretically in order to resuscitate it.

I shall then turn to new forms of interaction, notably personal relationships based on shared interests rather than place of residence, and the dramatic impact of the Virtual Community. As I shall argue, before these new forms emerged, the crowning success of community studies had much less to do with theory than methodology: the small community was the perfect vehicle for the ethnographic enterprise. Whether that remains the case is open to debate.[1]

Community as a Western Phenomenon

Let me begin with a question: Why has community, and thus community studies, been a concern of sociologists but not anthropologists unless anthropologists worked at home? Furthermore, why should community studies be a focus at home, in Western society, but rarely in other cultures? My own experience in research exemplifies this pattern. In West Africa I conducted fieldwork (Barrett 1977) in a remote village in Nigeria's Niger Delta connected to the Aladura independent church movement (see Peel 1968). The village, built on stilts because the land was flooded during the wet season, had clear physical and geographical boundaries with nearby villages. It also more

than met the criterion of solidarity and identity usually associated with community. The members, who called themselves the Holy Apostles, embraced their own distinctive religion and believed that God had granted them immortality, not in Heaven but in this world; and inspired by a message from God, they had embraced communalism to the extent that no money was exchanged for goods and services, the family unit was banned and marriage too for brief periods (the village also achieved a remarkable degree of economic success with very little outside help). Despite all this, and the fact that the term *community* was part of the official name of the village (Aiyetoro Community), it never occurred to me, nor apparently to the many accomplished scholars who advised me, to conceptualize the project as a community study. Yet when I later turned to fieldwork in a village in Canada (Barrett 1994), I was moved to deal with questions about the definition and morphology of community, the rural–urban continuum, and the myriad criticisms that had accumulated around community studies.

Part of the explanation of why community studies have been associated with the industrialized West concerns their specialized character. In the U.S., where *Middletown* (Lynd and Lynd 1929) is sometimes pointed to as the beginning of the modern community study, relatively little early social science was done in the village or small town, and even more rare was the project that adopted "community" as the primary focus of investigation. Instead quantitative-oriented sociologists concentrated on the city and the nation in order to investigate broad processes such as industrialization and urbanization. Eventually, of course, the sub-discipline of rural sociology made its appearance, but it had to struggle long and hard for recognition and legitimacy. In this context, the ethnographic study of the small community was distinctive and deserved to be labelled as such. In contrast, there was nothing exceptional about the village focus of anthropologists abroad, at least until the end of the Second World War. Indeed, virtually all anthropological research took place in rural society—in villages, hamlets and neighbourhoods. To have placed a special label on something that everyone was doing would have been superfluous.[2]

It must be interjected that an important exception to the quantitative thrust and paucity of community studies in American sociology was the famous Chicago school of urban ethnography that flourished between 1915 and 1935 (see Bulmer 1984; Kurtz 1984). Under the guidance of Park and Burgess, the city of Chicago became the laboratory for a small but remarkably talented group of scholars who helped to convert sociology from a speculative to an empirical tradition. Their methodology was primarily qualitative: participant observation, interviewing, life histories and documents. They favoured an ecological perspective, gave priority to process over structure, and had strong applied interests as they attempted to understand and ameliorate the widespread social disorganization that appeared to accompany massive immigration and rapid urbanization (the city of Chicago had 10,000 inhabitants in 1860 and two million by 1910).

During this period, ethnographic studies were produced on a number of topics including the homeless (Anderson 1923), the ghetto (Wirth 1928), the black community (Frazier 1931), gangs (Thrasher 1927), the vice sector (Cressy 1932), the business community (Hughes 1931), and not least, immigration and ethnicity in the monumental work of Thomas and Znaniecki (1918).

Bulmer (1984) has argued that too much prominence has been given to the qualitative tradition in the Chicago school, overlooking the quantitative interests of men such as Burgess and Ogburn. Yet the sheer number and high quality of the Chicago monographs can hardly be denied. It might be objected that only in a loose sense could these ethnographies be labelled "community studies." More appropriately, they might be regarded as studies of subcultures, districts or distinctive populations. In this context, Zorbaugh's observation (1929:vii) about the suitability of the community label for his comparative study of a wealthy district and a slum in Chicago's Lower North Side is pertinent: it may be more accurate, he suggested, to regard it as a study of a region.

A more serious objection is that because the focus of the Chicago school was the urban realm, rather than the more or less isolated village or town normally associated with community studies, it falls beyond the borders of the genre. Yet the loosely-defined community studies were a precocious example of the ethnographic works on urban neighbourhoods that began to emerge in the 1960s (Gans 1962, 1967). Moreover, the qualitative orientation of the Chicago school was not driven into the shadows as quantitative-oriented sociologists, in tune with the discipline's scientific ambitions, competed with theoreticians such as Talcott Parsons as its high priests. Indeed, out of the so-called second school of Chicago sociology after the Second World War emerged the influential, qualitative-driven theoretical perspective coined by Blumer (1969) as symbolic interactionism, its roots traced back through Mead, Cooley and Dewey.

Another part of the explanation for the Western focus of community studies, which would appear to apply as much to Europe as America, has to do with the basic concepts employed abroad and at home. Anthropologists dealt

with culture (sometimes called custom in the British school), sociologists with society. Culture was assumed to be something other people had. Of course, this was illogical. If culture exists anywhere in the world, it must exist everywhere. Nevertheless, culture was the concept tailor-made for "the other." Community, in contrast, represented the mainstream. Community was "us." When sociologists, and anthropologists who did research at home, focused on the small town or village, they were studying "themselves."[3]

The obvious criticism is that the scale of culture is so different from that of community that any comparison is flawed from the outset. Culture is the equivalent of society (or greater or less than society, depending upon one's academic politics), while community is merely a cog within society. However, it was not so long ago that community was regarded as a microcosm of the entire society. In other words, what was learned in the study of the small town could be generalized to the wider society. There was even an argument that community represented the heart of Western society, the "real" society, undefiled by urbanization and other aspects of social change. The implication was that community served as society's moral compass, and therefore had an impact much beyond its narrow boundaries. While most contemporary sociologists and anthropologists would correctly regard these arguments as merely amusing, the suggested distinction between "them" and "us" in terms of culture and community is, in my judgment, right on the money.

It may be thought that Miner's celebrated study of St. Denis in Québec (1939) contradicts the argument that when anthropologists and sociologists do fieldwork at home they in essence are studying themselves. This is dubious. St. Denis certainly qualified as a community study, but it was not one "at home." Influenced by Redfield, Miner classified the parish of St. Denis as a folk or peasant society, an aberration from the North American mainstream, its purported exotic features differing from conventional ethnographies abroad only to a matter of degree.[4]

Eventually another concept took firm hold in the social sciences in the process disturbing the distinction between "them" and "us." This was ethnicity. Like culture in the hands of Boas (1940, 1962), ethnicity in the hands of Montagu (1942, 1963) emerged as a foil to race in the biological sense. Ironically, while the concept originally served progressive ends, at least in America, by the 1970s (see Omi and Winant 1986) it had been claimed and depoliticized by neoconservatives, ending up as a means to avoid dealing with racism, especially "radical" explanations tied to capitalism and nationalism.

Another reason that ethnicity became a core concept was the realization that the phenomenon was alive and well in the Western world. This was significant because it demonstrated that extra-class sentiments had not been eclipsed by capitalism and urbanization. For sociologists not enamoured with the Marxian perspective, ethnicity was mana from heaven, even though it is probable that a class analysis was always relevant to ethnic studies.

Largely because of the politics of the postcolonial era, anthropologists too embraced the concept of ethnicity. For those who continued to work in the developing world, ethnic group became the politically correct replacement for terms such as tribe and primitive. For those who responded to the pressure to work at home, it was not social class—arguably the core of Western society—that drew their interest, but rather ethnic groups. To explain why this occurred requires a note of clarification about ethnicity. Earlier, it was remarked that if culture exists anywhere, it must exist everywhere—not just in the Orient. Similarly, if one human being is ethnic, all of us are ethnic. On what basis, then, are some groups labelled ethnic but not all groups? That label appears to be reserved for groups that are not part of the mainstream, and suffer accordingly in terms of power and reputation. The reason why Western anthropologists working in their own societies latched onto ethnic groups is that the latter were the new "other." While both sociological and anthropological research on ethnicity may have been inspired by a desire to reduce the plight of the underdog, the fact is that the focus on ethnicity allowed anthropologists to ply their trade as usual, and sociologists to discover the joys of the exotic.[5]

One final comment: it would appear that as ethnic studies soared, community studies floundered. Although it is hard to get a handle on the implied cause and effect, part of the explanation may be that community was transported to ethnicity, reflected in the expression ethnic communities. Eventually culture, supposedly the basis of ethnicity, was added to the mix, with the result that ethnic communities and cultural communities became interchangeable terms. The overlap among community, ethnicity and culture contained a certain logic. All three were counter-Enlightenment concepts bucking the trend, driven by capitalism, towards rationality, impersonality and universality.

The Decline of Community Studies

Community used to be a core course in many sociology and anthropology departments, but by the 1990s, it had begun to disappear from the curriculum, as happened at my own university. The explanation is two-fold, the first

part of which is so widely recognized that only a brief commentary is necessary. I am referring, of course, to the problems of defining community and specifying its morphological features in order to construct a theory of community. Half a century ago, Hillery (1955) famously compiled 94 definitions of community from the literature and concluded that the only thing they had in common was that they involved people. Actually, there is nothing particularly surprising about the ambiguity of the community concept. Place any major concept—culture, for example—under the microscope and it tends to crumble and scatter in front of one's eyes. Multiple, often contradictory, versions of concepts are the rule rather than the exception in the social sciences.

The conventional ecological approach to community contained two minimal elements: territory (geographical area and physical boundaries) and solidarity (shared values and feelings of identity and belonging). Related characteristics were equality, harmony, stability, simplicity and homogeneity. The discovery of village-type communities within the confines of the city, along with the recognition that conflict is as prevalent in the small community as solidarity, and that territory is a poor predictor of "ways of life," at least where technology has advanced beyond the rudimentary stage, cast serious doubt on the usefulness of the ecological model. In passing, it should be noted that culture, and arguably ethnic group as well, have been identified with the same attributes associated with community and subjected to the same criticisms (see Barrett 2002:2-8). This is hardly surprising given the anti-Enlightenment sentiments expressed by the three concepts.[6]

The other major reason that allegedly accounts for the decline of community studies is social change. Prominent throughout the history of the social sciences have been a series of overlapping typologies such as rural–urban, status–contract, mechanical–organic, folk–urban and gemeinschaft–gesellschaft. One criticism has been that the small community, usually identified with rurality and tradition, was little more than a residual category, the opposite of characteristics such as rationality, impersonality and functional specificity associated with the urban realm. What is quite remarkable, but little commented on, is just how quickly these grand typologies have faded into the background in recent years—the direct consequence of social change, principally capitalism, urbanization and globalization.

The upshot, arguably, has been the shrinking of differences between urban and rural society, or the city and the small town. There was a time in rural Ontario (Barrett 1994) when a school teacher who left the village on weekends was labelled a suitcase teacher, when the vil-

lage's grocer or hardware man could automatically count on the commerce of his neighbours and when the local pastor, ensconced for most of his life in a house provided by the church, had to work into old age because he had built up little equity to do otherwise. Now teachers by preference in order to guard their privacy often live outside the community that employs them, villagers flock to the shopping malls in nearby urban centres, and the pastor owns his house and invests in the stock market.

All this suggests, as Dewey (1960-61) observed, that differences between rural and urban society may remain but they are relatively insignificant. Adding to this picture has been the changing manner in which the small community has been conceptualized in sociology and anthropology. By the 1960s and 1970s the literature had gone through three phases. In the first, the small community was regarded as isolated and self-sufficient. By phase two it was recognized that no community was completely shut off from the outside world, and that external forces impinging on it had to be taken into account. By phase three there was a subtle modification. Outside forces did not just intrude into the small community; they were an intrinsic part of the community, as central as the local council. In a sense then, the macro–micro problem, often thought to parallel the urban and rural realms, and to be particularly acute during phase two, no longer existed. Curiously, this should have meant that the criticism levelled against the tendency to generalize the dynamics of the small community to the wider society had been outpaced by history.

One final consequence of the impact of social change must be dealt with: the assumption that it has generated a host of new problems—notably class, ethnicity, gender and power—which have overwhelmed any lingering interest in community studies that we might harbour. This is a peculiar argument because community studies can accommodate all of these problems, and indeed long ago took the lead in the exploration of two of them: power and class. While anthropologists and sociologists have certainly contributed to our understanding of power at the community level (see for example, Gold 1975; Vidich and Bensman 1958), it was the work of the political scientists that paved the way. Floyd Hunter's *Community Power Structure* (1953) and Robert Dahl's *Who Governs?* (1961) launched a debate about whether elitism or democratic pluralism prevailed in America. While most commentators sided with Dahl's pluralist position, Bachrach and Baratz (1962, 1963) criticized it for only focusing on one face of power: how decisions are made. Their argument was that there are actually two faces of power: decisions and non-decisions, the latter expressing the capacity to

prevent decisions from being made. Eventually Lukes (1974) theorized about a third face of power: structural power, the unintentional product of societal institutions. Although this body of literature was marred by considerable confusion, for our purposes what is important is that the debate itself took early shape in community studies.

Social class has figured prominently in several community studies (Dollard 1988; Hughes 1943; Williams 1969), perhaps most controversially in Warner's work (1942, 1949). Not only did he describe classes as empirically existing entities (rather than analytic tools) which varied in number from one small community to another, but he was also one of those writers who claimed that his findings could be legitimately generalized to the entire society. Critics (see Bell and Newby 1972; Kornhauser 1953) pounced on these claims, but it was Warner's confusion of class and status that drew most of the ire. The argument was that rather than probing social class in the small community, he simply described the status rankings of people. Even if we observe that the confusion between class and status is more often the rule than the exception in community studies, the fact remains that class has been one of their central foci.

The Symbolic Construction of Community

In the academic world a book or article is deemed to be significant if future researchers working in the same field or on the same topic cannot afford to ignore it. Cohen's *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1989) readily met this high standard. His aim was nothing less than to transform the field of community studies. Like writers before him, he criticized the long-accepted assumption that community was simple, egalitarian, homogeneous and harmonious, and could not exist beyond traditional society. He also dismissed the grand typologies of the past as being empirically unfounded and obfuscating. His theoretical approach, owing much to Weber, was phenomenological and interpretive. Meaning, talk and subjectivity trump structure, behaviour and objectivity. Cohen was not surprised that little progress over the decades had been made in terms of defining community and describing its morphology. These were positivistic dead-ends which fail to focus on the key to community: what people think and feel about it, how they experience it.

His symbolic approach to community focused on what it means to people, on values, norms and moral codes, and on the corresponding sense of identity and belonging. Community implies a group of people who feel they have something in common with each other which distinguishes them from other groups or communities. Without com-

munity consciousness community would not exist. Conversely, if people in a village or group no longer believe they share more with their neighbours than they do with outsiders, they no longer have a community. Cohen placed great importance on boundaries between communities, which may be physical, based on special properties such as ethnicity, or largely symbolic. This last case, he argues, is particularly potent under conditions of rapid social change. When the physical boundaries of community have become porous and fragile, people's sense of community—that is, their symbolic construction of community—becomes even more pronounced and salient. This is one reason that he contended that community (and thus community studies) retained its position of pride in sociological and anthropological investigation.

Cohen's conception of symbolism appears to be sophisticated. Symbols provide a focus for shared meaning and identity but they do not suppress individual variation. In other words, people relate to each other through the common symbols of community, but at the same time each individual also possesses his or her own interpretation of community. Presumably it is this distinction between collective identity and individual interpretation and choice that makes room at the level of behaviour for complexity, heterogeneity, hierarchy and conflict. As Cohen stated, "a society masks the differentiation within itself by using or imposing a common set of symbols" (1989:73). Of course, this is a variation on the old truism (see Murphy 1971) that belief systems or meaning systems are neat and orderly and disguise the complexity and disorder characteristic of actual behaviour. In other words, symbolic systems, like belief systems in general, promote the basic lie of the orderly universe.

A further comment on order is warranted. Following Lévi-Strauss (1966), one might locate the source of order in the inherent classificatory propensity of the human mind. Then there is Lévi-Strauss's assertion (1978) that life without order is life without meaning, which reinforces the emphasis Cohen placed on community symbolism. But in the anthropology of violence (see for example, Riches 1986; Stewart and Strathern 2002), order (reflecting elite interests) arguably equals legitimacy, and disorder (reflecting underdog resistance) illegitimacy. In this context, the order embedded in Cohen's symbolic perspective would appear to connote conservatism.

According to Cohen, symbols are devoid of intrinsic meaning; instead meaning is attached to them by thinking, feeling human beings. Similarly, "symbolic form only has a loose relation to content" (1989:91). What this implies is that the same symbolic form can have different meanings to people both within a community and from one com-

munity to another, or different symbolic forms across communities (even cultures) can mean much the same thing to everyone. In this context, Cohen emphasized the remarkable flexibility of symbolic systems, rendering them receptive to new meanings generated by social change. This characterization of symbols is interesting, but there is a familiar ring to it. Ironically, on a logical plane it resembles the manner in which functionalism used to be conceptualized, with its requisites, equivalents and alternatives.

These last comments open the door to a number of critical observations about Cohen's perspective. He purportedly was uninterested in the old concerns with the definition of community, but provided his own: community is a symbolic entity, a projection of individual attitudes and values into a unified system of meaning. He supposedly distanced himself from previous assumptions about consensus and harmony. Yet at the level of collective consciousness, where the symbolic construction of community is located, these elements are privileged over dissensus and conflict. Given the sense of belonging and identity, what other interpretation is possible?

It may be retorted that Cohen allowed for complexity and conflict at the level of everyday interaction. However, the dichotomy between culture and behaviour (the author referred to his symbolic approach as a cultural approach), raises more questions than it answers. This is not because it is dichotomous, which is a perfectly acceptable analytic procedure, but rather due to the vagueness of the dialectic links between the two levels of community. Consider the assertion that the symbols of community mask underlying complexity and disorder. Are the latter thereby neutralized, or is the symbolic community merely a flimsy conceptual backdrop, a pleasant diversion from the hard struggle of everyday existence?

The dialectic arrows, of course, also point in the other direction, from action to symbol, and it is precisely here where the inadequacy of Cohen's perspective is most apparent. All that he offered as an explanation of how the symbolic community is constructed was to state that each individual's thoughts and beliefs about community (somehow) are fused into an overarching coherent conceptual abstraction. In this respect, his study is much less satisfying and powerful than Barth's similar analysis of ethnicity. In *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), Barth shared Cohen's interpretive (Weberian) perspective in emphasizing the importance of self-identity and meaning. Barth also recognized the great variation of belief, action and structural form within a population; and not only did he highlight the critical role played by ethnic boundaries, but he also, like Cohen, contended that the symbolic meaning of these boundaries may intensify as their physical properties deteriorate.

But Barth did much more. He explained how, out of complexity and disorder, a viable ethnic identity is generated. Whereas Cohen equated culture and community, Barth separated culture and ethnicity. His argument was that ethnic groups only select a limited number of cultural features from the available repertoire. This is why he stated that one can not deduce the history of a culture from the history of an ethnic group. In general, these features, which in their totality are thought by members of each group to be unique, consist of overt signs such as dress and central values peculiar to a population. To give substance to his argument, Barth pointed out how a selected emphasis upon patrilineal descent, Islamic belief, and values such as male autonomy and aggressiveness generated a sense of ethnic identity and boundary among Pathans in Pakistan and Afghanistan despite enormous regional variation in both cultural practice and social organization.

In order to emphasize the continuing importance of community, Cohen placed considerable emphasis on localism. No doubt it can be reasonably argued that resistance at the local level to globalization has been noteworthy, but in *The Symbolic Construction of Community* there is a nostalgic, romantic appreciation for those who reject global change and capitalism, demonstrating that social class and power are not the only forces that drive contemporary society. Often Cohen shifted the focus from community to ethnic group and culture, the message being that all three are examples of meaning, identity and solidarity central to symbolism. Yet therein lies the problem. If there has been a single fundamental flaw shared by studies of community, ethnic group and culture, it has been their one-sided emphasis on the expressive dimension of human interaction.

Given Cohen's attraction to the work of Weber, it is ironic that in the latter's observations about community (see Neuwirth 1969), it was the instrumental dimension (rational calculation, behaviour, interests) rather than the expressive dimension (beliefs, attitudes, emotions) that dominated. Weber not only de-emphasized the ecological factor, but he also dissented from the popular view that communities were characterized by shared values, common interests and solidarity—all supposedly a "natural" product of ecological constraints. In Weberian theory, community emerges from competition for economic, political and social resources, and internal solidarity is always a function of conflict with competing groups or communities, rather than an expression of shared values generated by common residence in a given territory. Although

Cohen regarded communities as relational entities, and to that extent shared Weber's approach, it would appear that he failed to appreciate that in terms of community, it is Weber's political economy perspective, not his social action perspective, that carries the day.

Let me hasten to add that I do not deny that community may exist in people's minds. An apt example might be the propensity of anthropologists in a joint sociology and anthropology department to identify with each other and emphasize their differences from the sociologists, especially if the latter are more numerous. In this context, it could be said that the anthropologists have a "community." While such attitudes would appear to be harmless parochialism, at times they can swell into the driving force leading to the creation of an autonomous department. Whether or not this is the end result, however, depends on a host of additional (mostly instrumental) factors including bureaucratic policy, available resources and the attitudes and interests of the sociologists. This last factor reminds us that community is not solely constructed from the insider's point of view. We only have to consider the tendency of outsiders to refer to the Jewish community, the Black community or the Gay community, as if the individuals within them are uniform in interests and values, united by a common purpose. While I do not think that Cohen would deny that the projection of community properties onto minority groups is commonplace, he probably would argue that it counts for little when compared to the insider's perspective in which the sense of community that is fashioned is private, particular and potentially beyond the comprehension of anyone else.

Yet before writing off Cohen's study as a "brilliant failure," we must consider an aspect of his argument so far ignored. Early in his study, he stated

> Community is the entity to which one belongs, greater than kinship but more immediately than the abstraction we call "society." It is the arena in which people acquire their most fundamental and most substantial experience of social life outside the confines of the home. [1989:15]

Later, on the same page, he adds "community, therefore, is where one learns and continues to practice how to be 'social.'" Although one might counter with the argument that school and work are equally or even more important in this regard than community, the implications of Cohen's statements are far-reaching. If he is correct, they provide a fresh explanation of why community has been a universal form of social organization, and why it survives whatever social change throws at it.[7]

From a purely theoretical perspective it would be difficult indeed to imagine human life without community if this meant solely atomistic individualism, nothing but conflict and anomie, entirely instrumental relations, and no sense of identity and belonging. Yet before reversing ourselves and elevating the symbolic perspective to the top of the chart, we should take note that the importance of community as a fundamental socializing agency, or simply as an essential dimension of human interaction, is valid or invalid regardless whether the approach is symbolic or ecological. In other words, it applies equally well, or equally poorly, to both.[8]

Community as Method

The ecological and symbolic perspectives, of course, have not been the only ones to have left their mark (see Dasgupta 1996, chapter 1, for an excellent overview of approaches to community which inexplicably omits the symbolic perspective). Arensberg (1954), echoed by Geertz (1973), remarked that anthropologists do not study communities—they study *in* communities. He regarded community study as a method, not a distinctive field of social behaviour. The small community constitutes a naturalistic experiment, life in the raw, in which analytic problems can be examined under manageable conditions. For example, community did not become a focus for the investigation of power because the latter was more prevalent or important there than anywhere else. Instead, it was because power could be explored up close as it was exercised.

An impressive example of the methodological utility of community studies is *Small Town in Mass Society* (1958) by Vidich and Bensman. This study is unusual in that there is no discussion of general theory, virtually no review of the literature, no hypotheses or footnotes, and not even any references or bibliography (there is an excellent index and the authors did publish conventional academic articles on the community elsewhere). It is equally unusual in terms of the depth of understanding and the many insights into life in a small town. In a subtle manner the authors integrated the macro and the micro, showing how outside bureaucracy penetrated the community. Their success in moving from the front to the back stage is reflected in their analysis of gossip. The public arena, they state, is confined to expressions of community ideals, such as the assertion that everyone is equal and harmony prevails. Gossip, however, exists as a separate and hidden layer. It is the vehicle for airing the negative aspects of small town life. But because it is covert and unofficial, it rarely dislodges the public ideology or adversely affects any individual. Gossip, they concluded, is only one of many

contradictions between the public and private spheres of existence.

The publication of *Small Town in Mass Society* generated an enormous amount of hostility among the town's residents (Vidich et al. 1964), which might well be interpreted as a back-handed compliment to the authors, reflecting their success in penetrating the back stage; of course, current anxieties about the rights of the subjects of research to control how they are represented hardly entered the picture in those days.

Vidich and Bensman displayed little interest in defining community or contributing to the (dubious) effort of building a theory of community. While they did not entirely ignore the symbolic dimension of town life, especially as regards religion, they certainly did not conceive community as a symbolic construction. Instead their interest in the small community was methodological. In their words (1958:ix) the small community represented "a limited and finite universe in which one can examine in detail some of the major issues of modern American society."

Arensberg's perspective throws into relief one of the flaws in Cohen's study: it does not advance the ethnographic enterprise. With or without the symbols of community, all the hard slogging involved in mapping social relationships, grasping the actor's point of view, coping with contradictory norms and coalitions and enmity, remains to be done. That is where Arensberg's approach excels. To repeat what was asserted at the outset, the small community is made to measure for the ethnographic enterprise.

In summary, the ecological model is contaminated by the assumption of harmony, consensus and solidarity. Yet that assumption is not carved in stone. It would be perfectly legitimate to fuse the territorial dimension to the concept of community without buying into the presumed related values. In this respect the ecological model is quite different from the symbolic model. In the latter, it is impossible to separate consensus, identity and solidarity from the symbolic community. The two dimensions are coterminous

Arensberg's approach to community is deceptively simple. All that it requires is that researchers abandon the quest for a theory of community and instead treat community as a manageable laboratory in which to investigate sociological problems. Of course like my earlier comment about the symbolic perspective, all the hard slogging of fieldwork remains to be done. The difference is that data collection oriented to selected problems is the central focus of the methodological perspective, not community as a sociological construct, type or object.

It might be thought that Arensberg's perspective is assumption-free or a blank slate in terms of the definitional issue. Yet that cannot be the case. Investigators who favour this approach could not identify their research sites unless they had at least an implicit definition. My guess is that the most common identifying tag is territory: the recognition of community in more or less bounded ecological space. It might also be assumed that the problems that interest the investigator dictate the choice of community. That too is improbable. The normal procedure in ethnographic work is to select the research site first, possibly because it pleases or intrigues the investigator, and then let the problems emerge inductively as fieldwork progresses. Finally, there can be little doubt that the problems that eventually shape a study in the Arensberg tradition often reflect the personal interests of the investigator. For example, a major focus in my study in rural Ontario was race relations. Other investigators may have ignored this focus and concentrated on sexual relations, oral tradition or some other issue. All this might suggest that community as method is a hit and miss affair. Yet one thing is clear: it is this approach, exemplified by *Small Town in Mass Society* (Vidich et al. 1964), that has accounted for the high reputation enjoyed by community studies, at least in the past. In recent decades social and technological change has generated new forms of community interaction that arguably have rendered the traditional community obsolete.

New Forms of Community

In two fundamental ways, community appears to have been transformed. One concerns changes within the traditional community itself; the other involves the emergence of a new type of community, notably Internet or online communities.

Almost half a century ago, Webber (1963) captured the essence of the first type of change with his memorable expression "community without propinquity." His basic argument was that as a result of modern communications and transportation, Americans no longer relied on the place where they lived, such as towns and city neighbourhoods, as the source of personal ties and intimate friendships. Instead they developed personal relationships with like-minded individuals throughout the urban setting. In the author's words, "Americans are becoming more closely tied to various interest communities than to place communities" (1963:29).

A decade later, Wellman (1996) mounted much the same argument. His main thesis was that personal relationships in urban society had become "despatialized." That is, neighbourhoods no longer were the main source of friendships; instead, personal ties were based on mutual

interests and were scattered throughout the city. In view of the dominating presence of what the author labelled "personal communities," the local neighbourhood as the basis of primary relationships arguably had become an anachronism. Like Webber, Wellman traced the source of change in the traditional neighbourhood to technology: the automobile, public transportation and the telephone.

While the overlapping arguments of these authors are intriguing and plausible, they give rise to several questions. How generalizable is the thesis? In Webber's case, it appears that he extended the thesis to all of America. This is because of his contention that rural society had been swamped by urbanization to the extent that the rural–urban divide no longer existed. Wellman, in contrast, appeared to have aimed the argument specifically at the metropolitan region. In Paradise, the pseudonym for the community that I investigated in rural Ontario (1994), there was ample evidence that something significant was happening to personal relationships. As residents there never tired of stating, people did not neighbour any more. They tended to keep to themselves and to foster interaction and friendships with individuals and relatives further afield. Yet Paradise was situated within easy driving distance to large urban centres, including Toronto, and its population had been swelled by newcomers from these urban centres, the majority of them commuters. It remains an open question whether the distinction between personal and place communities is applicable to more isolated rural towns and villages.

We might also ask whether the thesis holds throughout the class system or mainly for the middle class and professionals. It is easy to imagine that academics might have the means and mobility to foster personal communities. It is more difficult to imagine poor people or housewives stuck at home with the children doing the same thing.

Another question is whether the thesis implies an either–or situation. That is, are personal and place communities inimical, meaning that the latter have been outpaced by history? Webber's answer seems to be affirmative, but Wellman suggested not only that some personal ties still thrive in neighbourhoods, but also that neighbourhoods continued to serve important functions. For example, they provided a framework for the adaptation and integration of immigrants and for the socialization of children.

During the past couple of decades, the sociology of the community has been enriched or impoverished, depending upon one's viewpoint, by a number of new concepts: Virtual Community, Electronic Homesteading, Netville, Netizen, Cybertowns, Cyberspace Colonies and the expression IRL (in real life). The term *virtual community* was coined by Rheingold, who wrote: "Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (1993:5).[9]

According to Rheingold, it was partly because the sense of community was diminishing in society (or IRL) that people were motivated to recreate it on the Net. He also drew attention to the similarity between the personal community as articulated by Webber and Wellman and the Virtual Community: both are based on common interests rather than geographical space. Rheingold presented a strong case for accepting online communities as real and genuine in their own right. While they are usually initially established by people seeking information about a common interest such as parenting issues or medical concerns, the consistent message in the literature is that people who participate in online communities eventually want more than information; they yearn for communication, interaction (albeit not face-to-face) and support—all defining elements in the traditional community. Rheingold pointed out that sometimes the gap between online interaction and real-life interaction is bridged. For example, in the San Francisco area in the 1980s, the participants of an online parenting conference, including Rheingold, eventually met face-to-face in a conventional conference.

In a new chapter entitled "Rethinking Virtual Communities" in a revised edition (2000) of his pioneering study, Rheingold appeared to be less certain about whether online communities actually exist, and whether, if they do, that is beneficial or detrimental to human society. He acknowledged the criticism that online interaction only constitutes an illusion of community, and that without face-to-face interaction, feelings of closeness and meaningful support may be stifled. Nor did he dismiss out of hand the argument that online activity may contribute to the decline of community because the time spent indoors alone at the computer screen may be alienating. As Rheingold pointed out, there is simply no agreement about these important issues. Although his confidence in his original thesis appears to have been shaken, it was not destroyed, because in the end he continued to express his faith in the reality of communities in cyberspace.

The same sociologist, Wellman, who helped us to understand the emerging distinction between personal communities and place communities, has also made a major contribution to the literature dealing with online communities. Like Rheingold, Wellman (1997) pointed out that the kinds of relationships found on the Internet

strongly resemble the personal communities that emerged in North America in the 1960s. Wellman's unique contribution was to advocate network analysis for the investigation of online relationships and to define them as social relationships embedded in social networks. Recognizing that scholarly opinion is sharply divided as to whether online communities can produce and sustain strong social ties, he wrote, "Many online ties are 'intimate-secondary relationships': moderately strong, informal, frequent and supportive ties that operate in only one specialized domain" (1997:198). This does not mean, he added, that such ties cannot sometimes strengthen into intimate-primary ones over time.

Wellman (1997) insisted that computer-supported social networks do much more than facilitate the exchange of information. They are a source of companionship and emotional support, and they enhance one's sense of belonging. With even more certitude than Rheingold, Wellman pronounced the reality and significance of online communities, or, more precisely, online social networks. Yet much to his credit, he concluded his paper with the candid admission that most of the key questions about computer-supported social networks have not yet been answered, indeed barely formulated. In this context, he introduced 18 such questions, the last being: "What is the context of online relationships in terms of supplying companionship, information, and various types of instrumental and effective support?" (1997:200).

Before leaving Wellman, some commentary on his social network approach is in order. In the revised version of Rheingold's book, he stated: "If I had encountered sociologist Barry Wellman and learned about social network analysis when I first wrote about cyberspace cultures, I could have saved us all a decade of debate by calling them 'online social networks' instead of 'virtual communities'" (2000:359). No doubt Wellman should be justifiably flattered by these words, but less so by the implication that "community" in the context of cyberspace is misleading. My own perspective on network analysis, pioneered by Bott (1957) in order to fill a gap formerly occupied by kinship analysis in a world where the family no longer dominated the entire social structure, and aimed at the social space between the individual's family and the state, is considerably less enthusiastic. In my judgment network analysis, at least in anthropology, has bogged fieldworkers down in technical detail, and conveyed the unfortunate implication that methodological rigour equals theoretical insight. It may well be that network analysis has a particular affinity to online communities, but my worry is that it will leave in the dark the fundamental forces in social science: differential power and institu-

tionalized inequality expressed in class, gender and racial–ethnic relations, as well as perennial questions about who benefits and who loses.

In closing, I shall briefly entertain some additional controversies about the Internet. Some writers, like Rheingold, have regarded the Internet as an instrument for democracy. Yet in a recent newspaper article (*Globe and Mail*, 3 July 2009, p. A13), it was pointed out that Iranian authorities used eavesdropping technology to track the online dissent that emerged in the wake of the unpopular 2009 election results. It should also be pointed out that the early dream of cyberspace accessible to everyone and not controlled by anybody has been threatened not only by government regulation but also by efforts of Big Business to turn it into a commercial asset. To a considerable extent these efforts have been retarded by the unruly nature of online communication, which has caused commercial interests to think twice about the wisdom of exhibiting their brand names.

Scholarly research on the Net also comes with many problems. One concerns representativenesss. Apparently in most online communities (see Nielsen 2006), about 90% of users are lurkers who never contribute, 9% contribute occasionally and 1% essentially run the show. It follows that any attempt to tap into opinion on the Net is treacherous. Yet in a curious way, the risk is little different than in traditional fieldwork where investigators often based their ethnographic reports on two or three cooperative informants, such as their landladies and landlords.

Another problem concerns ethics. Researchers employing the Internet as their data base may be resented as just another type of lurker. Even if an investigator is sensitive to the ethical issue, how does one go about obtaining consent and assuring confidentiality? One suggestion is to draw a distinction between public and private online communities (see Eysenbach and Till 2001), yet not only is the line between them fuzzy, but it has also been argued that some online communities such as hate groups do not warrant privacy because of the perniciousness of their views and goals. Once again, there is a familiar ring to all this. The same ethical issues have dogged anthropology since time immemorial.

Conclusion

There is a constant lament that contemporary society has lost its sense of community. That is, individualism has smothered neighbourliness and people no longer care about each other, except perhaps during a crisis. Yet this portrait does not make room for the personal (or interest) communities described by Webber and Wellman or for online communities. The shifting nature of community

over the past half century, at least in North America, gives rise to two key questions. First, in view of these new forms of interaction, is the methodological perspective still useful? Second, are these new forms genuine communities?

People continue to dwell in villages, towns and urban neighbourhoods, which must have some impact on their lives. The implication is that the modified traditional (or place) community to some extent remains a convenient setting for the investigation of a range of sociological problems. Personal communities add complexity to the research endeavour but they do not transform its character. As face-to-face communities, they are as amenable to investigation by the Arensberg approach as are the traditional communities of the past. For example, on numerous occasions in my research in Paradise, I employed the snowball technique to identify, trace and interview individuals beyond the community who appeared to have meaningful relationships with residents. Some of these outsiders shared similar interests with the residents, while others were former residents or relatives.

The relevancy of the methodological perspective to online communities is more ambiguous. This is not because they exist by virtue of mutual interests—a feature which they appear to share with personal communities—but because they are not face-to-face communities. When one does research on the Internet, important data such as the interviewee's pregnant pause, raised eyebrow or change in tone are not generally recordable. Moreover, one's interaction, and presumably rapport, with online participants is similarly restricted. My criticisms of social network analysis notwithstanding, the Internet may be the one setting where it is especially appropriate, and perhaps content analysis as well.

Finally, I turn to the question about the reality of the new forms of community. There appears to be little doubt that personal ties based on mutual interests rather than residential location have become an important dimension of social interaction in Western society (whether this holds true for its hinterlands and the rest of the world is a different issue). Less clear is whether they warrant the term *community*. Small in scale, it might be more appropriate to describe them by terms dredged up from the past such as primary groups, cliques, solidarities, or simply as pals and buddies.

While online communities are often anything but small in scale, it is also debatable whether they can be considered genuine communities. This is not because interaction online is sometimes hostile: incipient friendships fray, aggressive or obsessive personalities prevail, and hierarchies and anti-social groups emerge. Indeed, all of the above apply equally well to the mythical traditional community, supposedly undifferentiated and eternally harmonious. Rather the doubt stems from the fact that they are not face-to-face communities and from their questionable capacity to achieve strong emotional ties characteristic of friendships.

Bailey (1977, 1983) has restricted community to interaction where emotion trumps rationality, people are treated as ends in themselves rather than as instruments, and the emphasis is on the whole person, the person "in the round" with both good and bad features. Bailey's conception of community may fit personal communities (or what I might refer to as cliques) but hardly computer-mediated ones. Does this mean that the latter are not communities at all? Not necessarily. Central to the notion of community is communication, which online interaction provides in spades. Recall, too, that people using the Net want more than information; they yearn for emotional contact and meaningful interaction. Then there is Wellman's striking phrase: intimate-secondary relationships. Such relationships probably predominate over intimate-primary ones even in the traditional community: acquaintances exchanging greetings on the street, and pausing to chat after church service. Given these factors, there appears to be little reason not to conclude that if online interaction fails to qualify as a genuine community, it only misses by a hair.

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Notes

1 An earlier draft of this paper was prepared as the keynote address to a conference on community held at the University of Essex in England, May 2008, in celebration of the life work of Professor Paul Thompson on the occasion of his retirement. I acknowledge the helpful comments provided by him and Elaine Bauer. In addition, I am most grateful for the astute criticism offered by one of the external readers, prompting me to undertake substantial revision.

2 A notable exception was Redfield's (1973) focus on the tradition of the little community in peasant society.

3 Messerschmidt (1981:13) identifies three types of research within anthropology at home: insider anthropology, the term applied to anthropologists from dominant ethnic groups who do fieldwork at home; native anthropology, the term applied to anthropologists from ethnic minority groups who study their own people; and indigenous anthropology, the term for Third World anthropologists who do fieldwork in their own societies.

4 The folk or peasant image of rural Quebec eventually became a source of considerable controversy, particularly in the critical reaction of Garique (1962). In a foreward to a new edition of *St. Denis* (1963), Miner attempted to defend

himself by shifting responsibility for the folk or peasant image to Redfield's "Introduction" to the study.

5 This statement must be qualified. Many anthropologists and sociologists are members of the ethnic groups they study. As insiders, the notion of the "other" and the "exotic" is devoid of meaning.

6 According to Dasgupta (1996:16), there have been four distinct traditions of ecological studies: classical, neo-orthodox, sociocultural and social area. My concern here is mainly with the classical tradition represented by the Chicago school of urban ethnography. Promoted by both Park and Burgess (especially the latter's concept of concentric zones, later called Burgess Zones), the ecological perspective assumed that community life was shaped by the impersonal impact of its physical environment. This approach constituted an incipient conflict theory (which appears to have been ignored in later renditions of community studies) because of the argument that people in a given territory, such as a neighbourhood, are always in competition for resources (especially land) with those in adjoining neighbourhoods.

7 Redfield (1973) has argued that throughout history the predominate type of human association has been the small community.

8 This may be the place to state that I do not discount the significance of symbolism in human existence. To do so would be foolish. My preference, however, is for an eclectic approach that entertains symbolism as only one among many key social dimensions and draws from a range of theoretical perspectives, yet hovers close to what I consider to be the core dynamic of the social sciences: institutionalized inequality. Although I think that my criticisms of Cohen's study are sound, they undoubtedly are grounded in my own ideas about how to conduct sociological investigation, which themselves (almost inconceivably, of course!) are vulnerable to criticism. Perhaps Geertz was right when he quipped that over the long stretch of social scientific scholarship, we simply have learned how to vex each other more.

9 For an excellent overview of the virtual society on the Internet, see King et al. 1997.

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