Community as "Good to Think With": The Productiveness of Strategic Ambiguities

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You might not be surprised to learn that when I picked up my daily newspaper the other day (*Globe and Mail*, 25 April 2009) and tried to locate references to "community," I was quickly able to identify dozens of them. These references ranged over a wide variety of contexts and applications: "local community leader," "arts community," "farming community," "small community," "utopian communities," "outlying community," "technology community," "building communities," "mining community," "religious community," along with "excluded and marginalized community" were but some of the citations that appeared, including many that were not specified. "The community will not stand for this indiscriminate violence," was one of these unspecified references, proclaimed by a police officer outside a courtroom in which a judge had just rendered a decision on the sentencing of a man convicted of participation in a shootout on a Toronto street that had resulted in a number of injuries and the death of a young woman bystander (Appleby 2009:9).

The ubiquity of vague references to community is a familiar story to most of us. The range of these everyday invocations has been repeatedly noted by scholars who have in turn produced their own repertoire of proliferating references to, and multiple definitions of, community. A common scholarly response to this proliferation of unspecified invocations of, community has been to suggest that this ambiguity fatally undermines the analytical utility of this concept.

But I want to suggest a small contrarian's exercise: what if, instead of viewing this proliferation of everyday references to community as an indication of its banality, we chose to take this propagation as important in its own right? If people continue to insist on using community to refer to many different forms of association, perhaps we need to probe how it might do so rather than bemoan its lack of precision. So, rather than viewing the familiar ambiguity of allusions to community as the most problematic aspect of its conceptualization, what if we considered,

instead, the possibility of developing a mode of investigation that recognized this ambiguity as a useful analytical resource rather than as a handicap. The wide range of commonplace references scattered throughout my daily newspaper suggests that we are dealing with a veritable family of concepts[1] of sociation. That is to say we are not dealing with one concept in various references to community, but a genus of concepts. If so, our mandate in this contrarian exercise will be not to define community, but to establish a broad working model for investigating a class of related concepts. We need a framework that allows for that kind of breadth and that is, moreover, "good to think with." So rather than providing a definition, I want to suggest a working model of community that may lead us to a variety of situations and concepts. In employing this model, we may well conclude that some of these circumstances are not effectively grouped together, but such a conclusion is as useful an insight as the possibility that they might well be conceptually linked. In short, I am suggesting that the ambiguity linked with the ubiquity of references to community might just prove to be a useful vehicle for thinking about certain classes of sociation.

Strategic "Spots" of Ambiguity

In his introduction to *A Grammar of Motives*, Kenneth Burke (1955) chastises writers who scorn one philosophic term or other as being too ambiguous. Burke notes that "since no two things or acts or situations are exactly alike, you cannot apply the same term to both of them without thereby introducing a certain margin of ambiguity" and all the more so when dealing with key or what he calls "titular" philosophical concepts (1955:xiii).[2] Rather than avoiding ambiguity, Burke calls for "*terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise*" (1955:xiii) because it is at these strategic points of ambiguity that conceptual transformations can occur. Thus in trying to develop a theory of dramatism that can be used to investigate the forms of thought involved in the attribution of motives, Burke identifies five terms that he regards as "generating principles": act, scene, agent, agency, purpose (1955:x). He is not troubled by potential overlaps between these general terms, since these intersections arise because these concepts are interrelated as "attributes of a common ground or substance," in this case the attribution of motives (1955:xiii). Indeed Burke regards the overlaps among these terms as theoretically productive because they allow the analyst to combine and recombine distinctions and, hence, anticipate or generate different classes of theory.

Community, I will argue, is just such a "titular" concept, and in investigating it we can productively draw on concepts that are general enough that they can encompass a wide range of situations and are therefore concomitantly—and productively—ambiguous. At the same time, since these terms are all being used as attributes of the common ground of community, we should not be surprised by overlaps between them; indeed it is these interrelations that allow us to work and rework a variety of combinations and distinctions as we examine different cases. But in demarcating concepts that may prove useful to think with, we would be well placed to avoid recourse to the criteria that have usually predominated in academic reflections on this subject. As Marietta Baba notes, the Latin root of community is *communis* or common (2005: 135). Working from this notion, scholarly definitions of community have therefore often focused on listing what they consider to be the most important elements that must be held "in common" by members of a community: values, meanings, norms, or symbols being the most familiar items included in these inventories. But in and of themselves, these are essentially criteria of classification. They do not necessarily pose questions about how and whether these are mobilized in sociation. In a globalizing world in which ideas, materials and images are circulated across ever larger expanses, one would not be hard-pressed to imagine situations in which people hold similar expectations, meanings or symbols without necessarily being socially linked.

This classificatory dimension is particularly prominent in that broad swathe of contemporary scholarship that, drawing on Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined community" (1991), has treated community as, first and foremost, a form of categorical identity rather than actual interaction. But this emphasis does little, in and of itself, to focus our attention on the modalities of sociation that might be encompassed in a working model of community. As I have argued elsewhere:

> If we hold that the effort to construct communities is fundamentally an effort, whether successful, partial or failed, to mobilize social relations, then as Fredrik Barth has noted, communities cannot be created simply through the "mere act of imagining" (1994:13) or, one could add, the act of attributing. [Amit 2002:20]

Developing definitions that train our attention primarily on the categorical dimension of community is thus analogous to one hand clapping. A more effective working model of community must therefore focus on the uncertainties arising in the intersection between the idea and actualization of sociation. Thus inspired by Burke's notion of strategic ambiguities, in my own effort to develop some concepts that will allow us productively to investigate the

ground of community, I want to identify three strategic, intersecting points at which such ambiguities necessarily arise: (1) joint commitment; (2) affect or belonging; (3) forms of association.

Joint Commitment

In delineating an emphasis on joint commitment as a key generative principle of community, I am drawing on a concept of plural subjecthood developed by Margaret Gilbert (1994) as part of her wider ranging consideration of the philosophical status of sociality. Specifically, Gilbert is concerned with illustrating that in their ongoing "search for an elucidation of categories that are in some sense fundamental," philosophers would be well advised to add sociality to a list of better recognized categories such as "time, space, materiality, and mentality" (1994:5).

To establish a notion of sociality that could constitute it as a philosophically significant category, Gilbert suggests that we might respond to the sheer variety of things social by thinking in terms of degrees of sociality (1994:9). This in turn begs the question whether there are certain phenomena that can "have a claim to the highest degree of sociality" (1994:10). To pursue this question, Gilbert distinguishes several situations of sociality: common knowledge, mutual expectations and plural subject concepts.

> There can be common knowledge of many things, about the non-human world, and about people. And there is surely a great deal of something like common knowledge among humans. The question arises: are common knowledge phenomena social phenomena to the highest degree? [Gilbert 1994:11]

But drawing on an argument put forth by Charles Taylor, Gilbert notes that people may share common knowledge of some fact without necessarily sharing an important social link. In other words, common knowledge can be shared in a "detached, external way" without necessarily implicating a genuine social bond between the holders of this knowledge (1994:13). Similarly we could expect that other people will act in particular ways and that they and we might even coordinate our own actions on the basis of these mutual expectations without this form of coordination necessarily requiring or generating a particularly strong linkage between persons. Hence, as I have noted earlier, one could argue that the increasingly expansive reach of modern communication technologies can extend this kind of repertoire of common knowledge and mutual expectations without this necessarily or automatically being associated with the generation of strong social bonds. To identify situations that involve a stronger form of sociation, Gilbert looks to the concept of plural subjects.

Plural subjects are common phenomena that can range over a wide range of different forms of sociation. What articulates these different phenomena is their reliance on a "special unifying principle or mechanism, which I have labelled 'joint commitment'" (Gilbert 1994:14).

> If we have a joint commitment, each of us is committed, but we are committed independently. Somewhat artificially, we might put this in terms of our "individual commitments." If we are jointly committed, each one's "individual commitment" stands or falls with the "individual commitment" of the other. They cannot exist apart. [Gilbert 1994:16]

The joint commitment is "somewhat artificial" for Gilbert, because it may not be greater than, but is also not simply the sum of, two or more individual commitments as it creates a "new motivational force" in terms of which the interlocutors act. "It is neither mine, nor yours, nor a simple conjunction of mine and yours. It is rather, *our* commitment" (Gilbert 1994:16). While Gilbert's mission is philosophical rather than sociological, her rendering of "joint commitment" strongly resonates with key elements of Simmel's seminal notion of sociation, particularly his emphasis on the dialectic of interdependence between sociates (Simmel 1950). More generally both Gilbert and Simmel emphasize the wide variety of different forms that sociation can assume, yet both locate it as, first and foremost, arising through the relations and interdependence between individuals.

However, while Gilbert views "joint commitment" as the highest degree of sociality because it sets up a "true unity," a kind of "pooling of wills" (1994:20), I would be inclined to emphasize that this kind of interdependence is just as likely to engender tensions, conflict and anxiety. When you depend on other people to effect an enterprise, whether an organization, campaign, activity or what-have-you, the disagreements or divergences among you become all the more crucial and unavoidable because they need to be taken into account and dealt with in some way in order to effect or sustain the joint commitment. You can politely ignore disagreements over issues or with people on whom you do not depend, but it is much harder to be equally blasé about such differences with collaborators. That is when you are more likely to see people seeking to persuade, exhort, cajole or pressure each other to accept divergent versions of how to go about effecting joint commitments. That is why ethnic or neighbourhood associations, university departments, political parties, recreational groups or religious congregations so often give

rise to more or less heated organizational politics, factions and even ruptures. In short, joint commitments do not necessarily, or even often, generate consensus or even collegiality. Nor, for that very reason, can they always be successfully mobilized or sustained.

Placing the emphasis on joint commitment shifts the emphasis away from sameness, whether actual or imagined, as the basis for community and puts the onus more squarely on interdependence as the basis for this class of sociation. Interdependence is first and foremost a matter of coordination. Or, put in colloquial terms, "I need you to do this, I can't do it alone, but can we do this together?" Shifting attention away from sameness or "in common" kinds of attributes towards issues of coordination and interdependence allows us to acknowledge the connections between a wide variety of different sorts of possible commitments. A joint commitment can range from Suttles' (1972) notion of the "defended neighbourhood," an instrumental community of necessity set up as a mode of protection in uncertain and troubled environments, to the coordination of work related practices (Baba 2005), to more "pastoral" or romantic versions of solidarity (Creed 2006), to moral enterprises as varied as social movements, religious congregations, charities and self help organizations. A joint commitment may be ephemeral or enduring, partial or comprehensive. In other words, joint commitment is not intrinsically associated with one form of association or another, and as such, it highlights the areas of ambiguity attending which forms of sociation enable or require interdependent coordination and which do not or not as much.

Affect-Belonging

More than anything else, perhaps, discussions of community actually revolve around this aspect, i.e., a sense of belonging to a collectivity. So when people talk about a "sense of community," they usually appear to be assuming or implying that this sense of connection is affectively charged. But this presumption obviously begs more questions than it answers. What kind of affect? How is it distributed? How is it expressed?

On an everyday basis, most of us probably do not feel a need to vocalize our sense of belonging to collectivities in which we are stakeholders. Indeed, to the extent that the kinds of joint commitments discussed above might be fairly mundane aspects of our quotidian practices, punctuating these routines with loud proclamations of belonging might be viewed as extraneous, even strange. Explicit or strong assertions of belonging are more likely to occur when people are responding to unusual or even extreme circumstances. It is for this reason that a good deal of the literature on affectively charged expressions of community has often focused on more extreme or polarized circumstances. Thus, Anthony Cohen (1982; 1985) focused his examination of community on processes of boundary marking because he argued it was on the relational boundary between us and them that a feeling of difference from others outside the collectivity superceded divergences within it and people became most self conscious of their commonality. Victor Turner argued that feelings of communitas would be most strongly felt in situations of liminality when people were outside their usual routines and relationships:

> In liminality, communitas tends to characterize relationships between those jointly undergoing ritual transition. The bonds of communitas are anti-structural in the sense that they are undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, extant, nonrational, existential, I–Thou (in Feuerbach's and Buber's sense) relationships. Communitas is spontaneous, immediate, concrete—it is not shaped by norms, it is not institutionalized, it is not abstract. Communitas differs from the camaraderie found often in everyday life, which informal and egalitarian, still falls within the general domain of structure, which may include interaction rituals. [Turner 1974:274]

In contrast, Benedict Anderson's construction of nationalism emphasized the affective charge of the imagining of community that could lead people, in some circumstances, to be willing to die or kill for people they would never know personally (Anderson 1991). However, if Turner emphasized an intense, concrete communion and Anderson an abstracted sense of identification, both were clearly concerned with situations outside the quotidian. How then do we integrate this emphasis on oppositional or extraordinary situations as catalysts for the affective charge of community with the proliferation of frequent references to more commonplace situations or categories with which I started this essay?

While drawing on rather different conceptualizations, Cohen's, Turner's and Anderson's versions of community are dependent on the extraordinary or the polarized for eliciting communality. To the extent that they do so, they are more likely to limit rather than open up this field of investigation. So if we are interested in positioning community as a frame for interrogation rather than definition, and if we wish to extend rather than limit our field of investigation, then we need a point of departure that could conceivably accommodate the situations and issues encompassed in these more extraordinary or polarized instances but also allow for a broader range of less dramatic circumstances and responses.

But if we have to leave open the possibility that there may be a wide range of affect intersecting with different circumstances of plural subjecthood, then surely we also need to allow for the possibility that any one situation or case might also provoke a variety of different responses as well. In other words, if a joint commitment is not necessarily associated with consensus, by the same token why should we assume that it is associated with only one kind of affect or sense of belonging? To accommodate this range of possibility, I would suggest a notion of *distributed* affect-belonging. In so doing, I am inspired by the distributive model of culture that in one form or another, has been advocated by such scholars as Fredrik Barth (1987) and Ulf Hannerz (1992). Such a model of culture, according to Barth, assumes that knowledge and ideas are not simply shared but, in fact, are unevenly and unequally distributed across the "interacting parties in a population" (Hannerz 1992:13). For Hannerz, this distributive approach further entails a presumption:

> that people have understandings (also distributed in some way) of that distribution which may or may not be valid, but which in either case make a difference; these are meanings in their own right, and they affect the ways in which people deal with ideas and produce meaningful external forms. The major implication of a distributive understanding of culture, of culture as an organization of diversity is not just the somewhat nitpicking reminder that individuals are not all alike, but that people must deal with other people's meanings; that is, there are meanings, and meaningful forms, on which other individuals, categories, or groups in one's environment somehow have a prior claim, but to which one is somehow yet called to make a response. [Hannerz 1992:14]

Of course questions of belonging are as much about meaning as emotion. But adapting this broader distributive model to the more specific question of affect and community allows us to avoid using boundaries as a principal means for mapping belonging. A distributive model pushes us to move beyond us–them distinctions towards a more complex understanding of how unevenly and unequally notions of belonging, in all their permutations of meaning and emotion, may be dispersed. This is not a question simply of exclusion or inclusion but of how belonging may or may not be recognized, interpreted, responded to and felt. When linked to the question of joint commitment that I discussed earlier, this may mean that the person(s) on whom you depend to effect this mission may not be willing to recognize this obligation; might not consider it important enough to put aside other commitments; may have a very different idea of who participates or of the nature and extent of loyalty or investment that is required. So the intersection between a distributed notion of affect-belonging and joint commitment can yield a wide range of permutations or, to use Burke's term, ambiguities.

One kind of ambiguity that is worthy of note here includes the possibility that belonging is not necessarily or automatically concomitant with a palpable sense of joint commitment or any sort of collectivity. I feel "at home" in my Montreal neighbourhood at least in part because it is filled with familiar faces, sites and memories, but that sense of belonging is largely personal rather than collective. Beyond the reciprocity that I maintain with a couple of immediate next-door neighbours, I would be hard pressed to identify a broader sense of joint commitment with this sense of connection. Down the street, an old church that had been on the verge of redevelopment has been taken over and revitalized by a new congregation. Aside from services, the congregation sponsors talks and children's activities as well as events in the nearby park that are open to the general public. I have not participated in these activities, but it is certainly possible that the sense of local belonging experienced by some of these congregants intersects with a notion of joint commitment in very different ways than my own. And, of course, notions of belonging may vary widely across these congregants, among people who participate in the events they sponsor but who are not members of the congregation, people living alongside the church, and so on.

I raise this cautionary example because it reminds us that while forms of joint commitment can and do overlap with senses of belonging, the two are not coterminous. For example, ego-centred networks may be a critical basis for shaping a sense of belonging but they are not necessarily or even the likely ground for establishing forms of joint commitment. "My friends" may be foundational to what makes me feel "at home" in certain fields or sites but these interlocutors do not necessarily know each other nor are their relationships with me likely to be part of a broader collectively coordinated effort. Instead, personal networks often feature an assortment of dyads that provide their protagonists with critical social capital without necessarily serving as the basis for a more extensive sodality. Affect may also be charged by personal memories that are not shared in their entirety with anyone. Nostalgia may be a powerful source of romanticized belonging without requiring any form of joint commitment. So, we cannot assume that a sense of belonging or an affectively charged sense of connection are necessarily linked with collective interdependence. It is precisely the ambiguity engendered by the possibility, but not the certainty, of

intersection between joint commitment and belonging that we are seeking to investigate rather than assume. In short, setting out a distributive model of belonging and affect as part of the field of investigation does not necessarily put everything up for grabs, but it is deliberately intended to unsettle our certainties about the ways in which joint commitment and belonging might or might not intersect.

Forms of Association and Concluding Remarks

I started this essay by noting the wide range of situations and associations that are implied or listed through invocations of community in popular forums such as newspapers. This lack of specificity is what makes community as a concept and reference so attractively labile but also leads some commentators to dismiss it as being too general to be useful or as being a cover that obscures more essential understandings (Creed 2006:4). But it is in respect to this feature especially that we would be well placed to remember Burke's argument that simpler open-ended categories are best to think with if they allow us opportunities to transform our distinctions as we examine phenomena from a variety of vantage points. Since neither the possibility of joint commitment or of affect-belonging are narrowly or axiomatically associated with a particular form of association, in probing the uncertainties of their intersection, we are necessarily directed towards the broader ground of sociation. But to refrain from specifying, a priori, a set of associational forms as defining our field of investigation is not to say that these distinctions are of no consequence. In examining the interaction of joint commitment and affect-belonging across a variety of different forms of association, we have an opportunity to consider such issues as the effects of: scale, a very Simmelian concern (Simmel 1950); duration (short term as in oriented towards a particular event or highly canalized purpose or those more diffuse and of longer duration); mediation (as in face-to-face or mediated interaction); comprehensiveness (highly circumscribed association or comprehending many activities and relationships); degree of formalization, and so on. Nor does it prevent us from working through some or many of these distinctions by reference to a family of concepts such as action-set, consociation, assemblage and so on.

Keeping the range of associational forms open allows us to pose community as a question of sociation to be investigated across a variety of circumstances and qualities rather than to be prematurely delivered as yet another attempt to provide an unpersuasive precision through definition. We may not be ready (and likely never will be) to deliver the definitive answers but we should leave ourselves as much room as possible for posing questions about the dynamics of coordination, interdependence and affect in mobilizing social relations. In so doing, we squarely position ourselves at the threshold of long-standing anthropological preoccupations that have been pursued ethnographically as well as conceptually: how, when, where and why do people come together; what are the terms of their engagement; to what extent are they able to establish and perpetuate a coordinated effort; how do they feel about it? Positioned in this way, community in all its proliferating invocations is not a cover for more crucial aspects of sociality. Rather, it speaks to the relentless uncertainties entailed in many different forms of plural subjecthood.

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Notes

1 Margaret Gilbert (1994) uses the notion of a "family of concepts" in her efforts to establish the philosophical significance of sociality, a frame that I think can be usefully employed to characterize the field of sociation being invoked by community.

2 There is some resonance between Burke's notion of titular concepts and Rodney Needham's (1975) discussion of polythetic classifications as arrangements in which no one feature is held in common by all members of the category or is sufficient to define membership in this class. At the same time, there may well be an overlap between different polythetic categories.

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Commentary on "Community as 'Good to Think With'"

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In several publications, Vered Amit has critically examined the ways in which anthropologists and other social scientists employ the notion of community in their research (Amit 2002a, 2002b).[1] While anthropologists formerly tended to view communities in terms of "actual interacting groupings of people," Amit states, interest has shifted in recent years where, "following on from Benedict Anderson's notion of 'imagined community' (1991), anthropologists often appear to have in mind an emotionally charged category of social relations" (2002a:17). Anthropologists have been particularly interested in the ethnic, transnational or diasporic communities that categories of migrants are believed to belong to by virtue of their emotional attachment to a particular place of origin. The existence of any sort of community among a category of people should never be taken for granted, she emphasizes, because categories—such as ethnic categories of people defined by place of origin—are externally defined and may not correspond with internally generated groups of identification and social relations. Indeed, many people may have little interest in identifying with the category of people with which they are classed by others. The notion of "imagining community," Amit warns, therefore does not absolve "scholars from the responsibility to probe carefully the social ramifications and locations of these constructs," and she adds that the "imagined can all too easily become the reified, category, group, individual subject merging into the possibilities offered by the text of attributed identities" (Amit 2002a:19).

While Amit's earlier work has largely drawn critical attention to problems associated with the ways in which the notion of community has been employed in scholarly work, she turns this critical perspective around in the present essay to suggest that the very problematic aspects of community may present anthropologists with an interesting way of investigating different forms of association. More specifically, she points out that the prevalent use of *community* to refer to any sort of imaginable population segment that seems to share something—whether an occupation, religion, societal position, locality, size et cetera—has rendered the term so vague that it may seem to be of no analytical use whatsoever. Amit suggests, however, that the very vagueness of *community*, caused by its ubiquitous use, constitutes in and of itself a fertile field of investigation that may give anthropologists new insights into different kinds of sociation in modern society. To facilitate this research she proposes an "effective working model of community" that focuses on "the uncertainties arising in the intersection between the idea and actualization of sociation."

I find Amit's suggestion that ambiguity be viewed as a means of investigating the nature of the kinds of sociation associated with community highly stimulating. It not only turns many years of deconstructive critique of the notion of community into a new and productive research strategy, it also points to ways in which we may grapple with the nature of sociality, a key concept for any anthropologist who wants to understand not only how people envision the world, but also how they actually live with