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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

each other in this world. I therefore expect that many will find the suggested research methodology exploring the strategic ambiguities of community extremely useful in their work. If I point to certain aspects of the suggested model that can be questioned or perhaps need further exploration, this does not therefore invalidate it, but rather opens up for further discussion its potential, as well as possible limitations, within different contexts of investigation.

The Idea vs. the Actualization of Sociation

As noted, Amit suggests that a key area of investigation is the "intersection between the idea and actualization of sociation." This means that we will be looking at that which has been conceptualized as characterized by sociation, explore whether this sociation is indeed actualized, and if so, under which circumstances and how, who is involved and what sort of meaning do they attach to this actualization. This is a very helpful and relevant approach when looking at the many different "communities" that are evoked in common parlance, as illustrated by the several references to community in the Canadian newspaper that Amit cites in the introduction to her article. Thus, for anthropologists doing fieldwork in modern Canadian society, it will be interesting to explore just what kind of local group of people the "local community leader" is believed to represent, the significance of this so-called local community to the people concerned and whether—and how—they see the designated leader as somebody who can act on their behalf; or, what kind of artists are included in the "arts community," how this is decided, by what authority and with what implications for the artists and the work they produce; or, by which criteria people are seen to be part of a "religious community" and what this community, in fact, means to the individuals so identified.

While this exercise will say a lot about the relationship between ideas and practice in relation to community, it will not necessarily say much about those forms of sociation that remain relatively unarticulated. Many—if not most—social relations are not demarcated in any way by the actors but just enacted as a matter of fact in the course of daily life. This does not mean that they are unimportant, but their importance must be found at the routinized level of social life that makes us feel at home in the world (cf. Rapport 1997), as the following example illustrates.

Some years ago I commuted for a couple of months by train from a small town to Copenhagen. One day I found myself in a compartment of people who I could tell knew each other well because they engaged in lively conversation about various matters of importance to them. It appeared that they knew each other as fellow commuters who travelled back and forth by the same train every day and they were asking each other about certain persons who were missing on the train. This was, at the level of everyday practice, a small community of travel companions, but it was not conceptualized as such. The commuters just met every day and had a good time together during the one-hour train ride. The community might perhaps become actualized at the ideational level, if the commuters saw an interest in presenting themselves as a collectivity, for example as a pressure group who needed to be at work at specific times and therefore could not tolerate frequent delays or who protested against inexpedient changes in the train schedule. As long as the trains just ran more or less on time according to the set schedule, this incidental community of people was unnoticed, just as it did not generate a consciousness of a particular group identity or a sense of belonging—yet it was clearly of importance to those concerned. Indeed, considering the fact that it was based on socializing for two hours every day, five days a week for possibly many years, it may have constituted a major form of informal social life to the commuters.

This is just one example of the many matter-of-fact, ad hoc forms of sociation that may make up a central aspect of life, and it may, therefore, be important to distinguish between marked and unmarked forms of sociation. Rewriting Arjun Appadurai slightly, we may state that unmarked sociation "refers to the plethora of social relations that characterize the world today, relations at various levels, with various valences, and with greater and lesser degrees of social consequences," whereas marked sociation refers to "the subset of these varying social relations that has been mobilized to articulate the boundary of difference" (1996:13). As emphasized by Amit, such boundary making does not necessarily correspond to the actual social relations taking place. An important question for anthropologists to address is therefore under which circumstances what kinds of sociation become actualized as ideas and therefore marked and for what purposes. I have already suggested that it may occur when a group of people find that they can further a shared interest—such as pressing for improved train service. However, the sociality that the commuters enjoyed can clearly not be reduced to their common desire to enjoy the most efficient train service. Indeed, some of the references to "community" from the daily newspaper that Amit quotes suggest that community may be perceived, to a great extent, as a form of interest group.

The simplification inherent in this demarcation of a community points to a tension between the broad and complex nature of social relations and the many forms

of sociation that they involve, and the separation and highlighting of particular subsets of relations as a recognized community in terms of a particular overriding idea. It also underscores that the notion of community is not innocent, but may be associated with powerful interests. Furthermore, in so far as communities are demarcated by not only those belonging to them, but also by others who imagine their existence, being associated with a demarcated community may not necessarily be in the interest of those involved. This has been especially apparent in the classification of certain immigrants and refugees as part of certain ethnic or religious communities. While they may identify with such communities to a certain extent, they may not agree with "the boundary of difference" highlighted by this classification. This is especially the case in the many receiving societies, where such communities have become associated with a range of problems (such as criminality or terrorism) with potentially grave consequences for anybody identified with the "community."

A Cross-Cultural Perspective

While there is no doubt that the term *community* has won increasing use throughout the English speaking world, it cannot be identified so easily in other parts of the globe. Writing from the vantage point of a Danish-speaking society, it is obvious that there is no corresponding Danish word for "community." Indeed, it is apparent that journalists and academics experience some difficulty translating many of the "community" constructions that come to us from abroad. Thus, "the European Community" (EC) has been translated as "Det europæiske fællesskab." At a more informal level, "the international community" is usually translated as "det internationale samfund," and the term "ethnic community" as "etnisk gruppe." Each of these translations have somewhat different meanings. "Fællesskab" is etymologically close to the English "fellowship" and corresponds to the German "Gemeinschaft." The word "samfund" can be translated as "society," and "gruppe" as "group." These varying translations underline the great complexity and ambiguity of the English concept of "community" and it could be a project in and of itself to examine and compare the different ways in which "community" is translated depending on the particular context and the interests at stake. The lack of an all-embracing Danish term for community means that it is not possible to apply Amit's suggested model directly to Danish society—or to many other societies. It will be necessary to look for other ubiquitous emic terms that carry a complexity and ambiguity comparable to that of community. In the case of Denmark, I suggest that a fruitful term might be "integration"—a sort of negative of community in that it connotes insufficient belonging within a community, society or other collectivity.

During the past few years, I have been involved in a publication project with colleagues at the Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, focusing on the concept of integration (Olwig and Pærregaard 2007).[2] During the past 50 years, the term integration has been used increasingly in public debate, but often with different meanings. According to the Danish Language Committee, an institution that registers the vernacular use of words in Danish newspapers and other public media, *integration* has been part of the Danish language since the 19th century, when it entered as a foreign loan word.[3] It was not before the middle of the 20th century, however, that it became a commonly known term. During the 1950s, it was used primarily to refer to the economic, political, and military integration taking place in Europe after the Second World War, and in the 1960s it became an important term in the public debate on the Common Market, as Danes began to discuss how joining the European Economic Community would influence Danish society.[4] During the 1970s, *integration* began to be used in the field of pre-school pedagogy that gained momentum during the 1960s and 1970s. Here, *integration* was, and still is, used to refer to the need to incorporate children of varying mental and physical capacities (for example, due to age or forms of disability) in public pre-school institutions.

By the 1990s, politicians, journalists and social scientists began to use the concept to discuss the social and cultural challenges of incorporating immigrants and refugees into the Danish welfare society. Around the turn of the millennium, the meaning of integration gradually changed from referring to more general issues of integration into Danish welfare institutions, to the specific problem of integrating immigrants and political refugees into Danish society. When a new Ministry of Integration was created in 2001 by the newly elected right of centre government, nobody had any doubts about its target group. The issue of integration no longer had to do with Denmark's position in the European Community or how to create a well-functioning group of children with various abilities, it now concerned how to deal with immigrants and refugees in Danish society.

Danish migration researchers have been critical of the term integration, pointing out that it is unclear, understood in terms of common sense assumptions and interpreted in different ways depending on the context—critiques that also have been directed at community, as Amit

points out. This lack of precision is, of course, a great problem for immigrants and refugees who face continuous demands to integrate, but no clear explication of what exactly this integration involves. For our research project, however, the ambiguity and shifting meanings of integration became an important entry point for examining varying Danish understandings of such notions as the nation-state, Danishness, the welfare society, equality and citizenship. While we had expected initially that the book would analyze how immigrants and refugees encounter and experience integration as a political project in contemporary Danish society, it became a study of how Danish notions of community (in its many permutations) and belonging are shaped and reshaped in an increasingly globalizing world. Thus, the idea of Denmark as a culturally homogeneous national community and egalitarian welfare society that is threatened by the many foreigners descending on the country has become a dominant one in many debates and policies on integration. While a concern with integration might be thought to implicate a desire to initiate a process of inclusion, it has had the opposite result in Denmark. Indeed, the Danish integration debate seems to have resulted mainly in the demarcation of a national community of good (ethnic) Danes bordered by various communities of (ethnically different) unacceptable non-Danes.

The strong Danish focus on a culturally homogeneous society grounded in a single shared national community is very different from the Canadian celebration of a multicultural society composed of a host of different ethnic and national communities. Perhaps this gives us a clue as to why "community" is so ubiquitous in Canada, whereas "integration" is all over the place in Denmark. A multicultural society depends on the existence of a multitude of different communities that can be defined in various ways depending on the purpose at hand. A culturally homogeneous society, on the other hand, requires the existence of outsiders who need to be integrated because they are different, and the terms of integration therefore are best left vague. Amit's essay, thus, not only points to the value of analyzing the ambiguity of words like *community*, it also leads to engagement with the broader semantic field of terms that are tied to words like *community* and the many notions and forms of sociation that they implicate.

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Notes

1 I would like to thank Maja Hojer for her comments on my commentary.

2 The project resulted in the publication of the Danish book *Integration. Antropologiske Perspektiver* (*Integration: Anthropological Perspectives*) (Olwig and Pærregaard 2007). An English-language edition of this book has been prepared and the following discussion is based on the introductory chapter in this manuscript (Olwig and Pærregaard 2011).

3 This information was provided by the Danish Language Committee (*Det Danske Sprognævn*) on 12 January 2006.

4 Denmark joined the European Common Market in 1973.

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Response to "Community as 'Good to Think With'"

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Vered Amit's paper is a welcome development of arguments she began in dialogue with Nigel Rapport in *The Trouble with Community: Anthropological Reflections on Movement, Identity and Collectivity* (2002) in which Amit argues the importance of disjunction and disembedding; unsettling the centrality of social bonds and con-