

Unpublished paper

## **“Better Mus’ Come”: re-thinking ‘community’ as a radical social imaginary**

### *Abstract*

Although there are signs of a revival, sociological interest in the concept of community has been severely undermined by successive demonstrations of the incoherence of its theorisation. But both within the academic field occupied by communitarian philosophy and in public discourse the rhetoric of community has been sustained and made visible in soap operas, government initiatives and social movements. Despite sociology, people persist in conjuring up ‘community’. The paper suggests a formulation of the concept of community which meets the requirement of theoretical rigour and purchase on everyday life. It argues for a distinction between ‘realist’ and ‘idealist’ formulations of the concept and an acceptance of the limited usefulness of the former. The paper suggests that the principal definition of ‘community’ should be that it is a particular type of social imaginary, one which embodies disparate yearnings for radical change and a better life. Empirical support for this is drawn from the author’s long-term research in a multi-cultural inner-city area, and from some of the literature on new social movements.

It is perhaps surprising that the notion of ‘community’ as a focus for sociological investigation ever survived Hillery’s classification of 94 sociological definitions of the concept in 1955; Pahl’s denial, in 1966, of the rural-urban community continuum, Stacey’s refusal, in 1969, to use the term altogether; and Bell and Newby’s rather despairing comment that ‘for the time being at any rate [we can] merely treat community as what community studies analyze’ (Bell and Newby 1971 pp. 27, 32, 49, 52). Pahl was unequivocal in his critique: ‘We have seen that the word “community” serves more to confuse than illuminate the situation in Britain’, he wrote (Pahl 1970 p. 107). ‘By the 1970s’, according to Savage and Warde, ‘the community studies were denounced as scientifically flawed’. ‘Intractable’ conceptual and methodological problems ‘finally undermined the use of the term as it was recognised that its use was ideological’ (Savage and Warde 1993, p.105). Day and Murdoch (1993) concur with this view. They state that Bell and Newby (1971) turned out to be the ‘death knell’ of the concept of community, and it was ‘discarded’ within mainstream sociology. Despite this pulverising, there was a resurgence of theorising and studying communities in the 1980s, as Crow and Allan (1994) have demonstrated. But sociologists still have no agreed definition of the concept. There are, however, common focal points to be drawn from the 94 varieties. Bell and Newby managed to distil Hillery’s definitions of community as follows: ‘Thus, a majority of definitions include, in increasing importance for each element, the following components of community: area, common ties and social interaction’ (Bell and Newby 1971 p. 29). Later, they distinguished three separate uses of the concept: as a way of describing a geographically defined area (such as a housing estate); as a sociological concept referring to degrees of social interaction; and as a type of relationship characterised by intimacy (Bell and Newby 1976, Savage and Warde 1993 p. 104). Crow and Allan, like Bell and Newby, are unwilling to support any single definition of community, but point to various ‘senses’ in which the term is used. Bell and Newby’s three ‘components’ make another appearance, but social interaction is specified

more precisely in terms of shared activity, and common ties are defined in terms of interests and identity. Crow and Allen note Willmott’s approach to community as shared territory, or shared social characteristics (e.g. ethnicity, occupation, leisure interests), or shared sentiments and attachments, and they summarise Lee and Newby’s definition of community as a common ‘local social system’ or a shared sense of identity (Crow and Allen 1994 pp. 3 - 4).

Returning to the problem of definition, Crow and Allan note the distinction ‘between broadly geographical, social structural and interpretative dimensions of community’ (1995 p. 148) and argue for a fourth, the temporal, in order to stress ‘the dynamic nature of community formation and development’ (p. 147)

### **The real and the ideal**

These summaries are derived from the ‘community studies’ tradition within sociology. With their strong empirical focus these studies may be classified within the epistemology of realism. As such, ‘community’ tends to be treated as a ‘thing’, an entity or a set of people which can be summarised, measured and evaluated. There are serious problems with such an approach, as I shall argue later. But if we were to abstain from the search for a precise definition of what this ‘thing’ actually is, and treat ‘it’ as a research topic, a list of dimensions to be investigated, derived from the work cited above, might be as follows:

1. the territorial spaces which are inhabited. One aspect of this, usually omitted in the ‘community studies’ tradition, but which is crucial for a proper understand of a ‘community’ over time, is the processes by which the spaces are constructed and represented (Lefebvre 1991);
2. networks of social relationships: investigation will show the degree to which these are characterised by personal intimacy and associated with a shared sense of belonging;
3. interests and the active pursuit of goals whose realisation constitutes and reconstitutes the local social structure. Investigation will reveal the degree to which these interests are shared, and in what ways they impact on the construction of individual and collective identities of the people being studied; and
4. the changes in representations, relationships and goals that are observable as time passes.

If sociology is to have relevance to public life it must engage in the types of research undertaken by ‘community studies’. Such research has, however, resulted in another approach to the concept of ‘community’. Anthony Cohen argues:

that the community itself and everything within it, conceptual as well as material, has a symbolic dimension, and, further, that this dimension does not exist as some kind of consensus of sentiment. Rather, it exists as something for people ‘to think with’. The symbols of community are mental constructs: they provide people with the means to make meaning. In so doing, they also provide them with the means to express

the particular meanings which the community has for them (Cohen 1985 p. 19).

In conceptualising ‘community’ as a mental construct, one of the tools with which people make sense of the material situations in which they find themselves, Cohen avoids the defects of the realist approach. It should be self-evident that ‘community’ is something more than a ‘thing’ whose constituent parts can be listed and measured, even though many interesting and useful statements may be made when territorial boundaries are investigated, the affective quality of social relationships are charted and divergent or consensual values, goals and identities are discussed, particularly if all these variables are understood to be in flux over time. If, as Cohen suggests, ‘community’ is a set of symbols used by people to construct a meaningful account of their living situation, the research task becomes one of identifying those symbols and showing how they are employed to, for instance, demarcate ‘community members’ from Others. Thus the turn towards an idealist epistemology may be tempered by empirical investigations which show the real effects of subjective constructs.

What remains missing even from this, improved, approach is the dimension which was at the centre of early sociology’s musing on ‘community’ and which is replicated in the public discussion today, whether in communitarian philosophy, ‘Third Way’ politics or *The Archers*. This is the use of the term to evoke notions of ‘the good society’ and to evaluate the present in terms of the past and the proposed future. This is precisely how Tönnies used the term in his often maligned but still potent distinction between ‘community’ and ‘association’. As a social democrat, Tönnies utilised the distinction as a means of critique - capitalism exemplified the triumph of mere association, regulated by contract, over solidary relationships based on the loyalties imposed in pre-capitalist societies by blood, family and shared land (Stafford 1994, Tönnies’ extracts in Abraham 1973). Weber refined Tönnies’ idea with his distinction between ‘communal’ and ‘associative’ types of social relationships, where the former are based on affectual or traditional types of action and the latter on ‘a rationally motivated adjustment of interests’ (Weber 1964 p. 136). While Weber restrained his evaluation of which type of relationship was politically preferable, Marx was quite explicit. He conceptualised communism as the future realisation of species-being and the supercession of present alienation (Marx 1963 (1844)). Making plain the etymological link in English and French between community and communism, Engels wrote:

as soon as it becomes possible to speak of freedom the state ceases to exist. We would therefore propose to replace *state* everywhere by *Gemeinwesen*, a good old German word which can very well convey the meaning of the French word ‘commune’ (Marx-Engels 1968 pp. 332-37).

While, as feminists, they are critical of communitarian philosophy, Frazer and Lacey (1993) point out that feminist theory shares with communitarianism a critique both of liberal individualism and state socialism, as well as an assertion of the ethical value of social responsibility. In practice feminism supports efforts to establish here-and-now democratic, non-hierarchical institutions which intend to promote emotional and practical support among members along lines

advocated by some communitarian thinkers. Both discourses postulate the formation of new forms of ‘community’ in opposition to existing social arrangements<sup>1</sup>.

Taking a final example from popular culture, Phil Cohen (1997) argues that the appeal of soap operas lies in their ability to perpetuate a vision of community in which the real differences between people are contained and resolved as the plot unfolds. The point I would stress here is that soaps are idealisations in the two ways: they operate at the level of symbols, and they provide a vehicle by which people may work through their imaginings of a better set of social relationships than those they know now. In contrast to our daily experience of the impossibility of resolving most of the contradictions we face, in the soaps a ‘solution’ (sometimes drastic) always turns up. To capture this forward-looking aspect of ‘community’ I adopt the title of a book of essays by bell hooks (1991): ‘yearning’. A persistent theme of hooks’ essays is her memory of the types of inter-personal and communal solidarity which she experienced in her childhood in an African-American rural area. The yearning to re-work such supportive networks in forms appropriate to metropolitan, late-modern society is, according to hooks, a characteristic of much of black American culture and political struggle. She expresses this idea most succinctly in her essay ‘Beloved Community’, subtitled ‘a world without racism’. She writes (of the USA, but I want to borrow this idea for Europe):

Many citizens of these United States still long to live in a society where *beloved community* can be formed - where loving ties of care and knowing bind us together in our differences. We cannot surrender that longing - if we do we will never see an end to racism (hooks 1995 pp. 264-5, italics as in original)

‘Better Mus’ Come’, the campaign slogan of Michael Manley’s People’s National Party in the Jamaican elections of the 1980s, evokes the same theme of longing for a new social settlement, to be enacted, according to Manley, in social democracy. Such longings are not, however, the preserve of black people. ‘Community’, I am arguing here, is the term used by people of all ethnic groups not simply to characterise the present, or to demarcate ‘us’ from ‘them’, but to evaluate the present and the past and to carry dreams, hopes, yearnings for the future. As hooks might put it: there is a yearning in the modern/postmodern world for beloved community.

My position therefore needs to be distinguished from the notion of ‘imagined communities’. Benedict Anderson’s important insight into the symbolic dimension of ‘community’ is frequently referred to, but it has been mis-used in much of the recent sociological discussion of ‘community’ (Anderson 1991 [1983]). Anderson’s task was to reconceptualise nationalism. He defined ‘nation’ as ‘an imagined political community’ (1991 p. 6). In one respect his approach to ‘community’ was similar to that of the realists. The nation is, according to Anderson, thought of in much the same way that people think of community: ‘as a deep, horizontal comradeship’ or as ‘fraternity’ (ibid. p. 7). His contribution - like Anthony Cohen’s - was to emphasise that ‘community’ is a concept, rather than a thing. In Anderson’s formulation, ‘community’ and

'the nation' are a means of thinking about comradeship or fraternity. These are equivalent to the issue of intimacy in social relationships which is investigated in the 'community studies' tradition. In so far as this definition of community is one that recurs most frequently in the realist literature. Even Althusser read Marx as defining 'community' in terms of 'concrete intersubjectivity, love' as well as 'fraternity' (Althusser 1969 p. 225 fn. 6). Thus Anderson's approach is quite conventional. In this paper, I am suggesting that the 'real' and the 'symbolic' definitions of 'community' should be separated more carefully in sociological analysis, allowing the proposition that 'community' is a social imaginary, the precise contents of which may vary, but which will invariably express an inchoate yearning for an improvement of the affectual and material conditions of existence.

Earlier, Robert Nisbet (1967) had conflated the the symbolic/ideal dimension of community with the material/real dimension of community in much the same way that Anderson has. Nisbet stated that 'community' is the 'most fundamental and far-reaching of sociology's unit ideas' (ibid. p. 47). This concept - along with authority, status, the sacred and alienation - is one of the organising ideas in his comprehensive discussion of the works of the principal figures in the founding of sociology. Nisbet offers yet another definition of 'community':

By community I mean something that goes far beyond mere local community. The word, as we find it in much nineteenth and twentieth century thought encompasses all forms of relationship which are characterised by a high degree of personal intimacy, emotional depth, moral commitment, social cohesion, and continuity in time. Community is founded on man conceived in his wholeness rather than in one or another of the roles, taken separately, that he may hold in a social order. It draws its psychological strength from levels of motivation deeper than those of mere volition or interest, and it achieves its fulfilment in a submergence of individual will that is not possible in unions of mere convenience or rational assent. Community is a fusion of feeling and thought, of tradition and commitment, of membership and volition. It may be found in, or given symbolic expression by, locality, religion, nation, race, occupation, or crusade (Nisbet 1967 pp. 47-8).

Here, the distinction between 'local' community as a 'form of relationship', whose contours may be empirically investigated, and community as 'a fusion of feeling and thought' is blurred. But Nisbet was merely following that trend in classical sociology - and, following Anderson, in some contemporary writing - in which this distinction is hardly made. In fact, the force of the concept, and its ability to survive the assault launched against it in more recent sociology, derives entirely from its ability to fuse people's efforts to understand 'real life' with their desires for profound, even utopian, change. Nisbet neatly captures the concept's elasticity - it can conjure up both the intimacies of life in an actual village and a crusade for an idealised vision of the future.

While its ability to conflate the real and the ideal helps us understand the enduring appeal of the term 'community', it gives rise to confusion when the

term is used by sociologists who fail to make an analytical distinction between the two uses. As Liz Fraser puts it, even if it were to be accepted that the term is used to refer to symbolic or imagined communities, or that it is an umbrella term encompassing social relations such as trust, solidarity, sisterhood and the like, 'the literature and the discourses of community are extraordinarily vague and unclear and replete with invalid inferences' (1995 p. 8). Two examples illustrate Fraser's point. Both provide fascinating empirical detail and sociological analysis of localities in which 'actual communities' have been formed. Paul Lichterman (1996) studied 'Green' and 'anti-toxics' activists in three locales in the USA. Carl Hylton (1997) studied African-Caribbean 'community groups' in Chapeltown, Leeds.

Lichterman states that he adopts Robert Bellah's definition of 'genuine communities' as those in which there are interdependent social bonds and a shared sense of cultural authority. He states that he wants 'to limit [his] use of the term [community] to designate forms of togetherness based on some sense of shared obligation' (1996 p. 250 fn. 2). But he actually uses the term in other ways as well, such as in the expression 'imagined communities of activists' (ibid. p. 34). Elsewhere he emphasises that the communities he is analysing are not 'pre-given', 'natural' or 'primordial' - they are constructions (ibid. p.106). He distinguishes between the 'local communitarian community' among African-Americans campaigning against toxic pollutants in their neighbourhood and the 'personalized community' among the white activists involved in Green politics. Throughout, the reader is unclear whether these 'communities' are real - in the sense of Bellah's definition - or imagined.

Two difficulties emerge in Carl Hylton's thorough and informative account of African-Caribbean organisations. Firstly, there is no detailed discussion of what is meant by community. When he deals with the issue of homogeneity/heterogeneity which must arise when 'communities' are investigated, he writes:

I am unaware of a community not having subdivisions in its ranks . . .  
The African-Caribbean community is no exception. It is not an undifferentiated mass but contains many elements helping to constitute a whole (Hylton 1997 p. 193)

He asserts that the divided elements make up a whole. His research demonstrates the divisions among African-Caribbeans in Chapeltown - his list of 93 separate organisations is one such testimony. He refers to the 'African-Caribbean community in Leeds' as 'tight-knit', but unity is not demonstrated. In fact, in the same sentence in which 'tight-knit' appears, he also refers to the 'inherent contradictions' in this 'community' (ibid. p. 264). The second problem - the failure to treat 'community' as a symbolic construct - accounts for this difficulty. Hylton's project is explicit: to assist African-Caribbeans in forming a 'true concept of their self-identity', for which 'positive self-consciousness, elucidation of African and African-Caribbean history and culture' are required (ibid. p. 272). Despite providing evidence of the difficulties faced by those in Chapeltown who have asserted this 'true [Afrocentric] identity', the possibility that this is an imaginary identity, formed

in constructing a symbolic community of diasporic and indigenous Africans, is never entertained. In fact, the work of black scholars such as bell hooks and Paul Gilroy who have argued on these lines is explicitly rejected. Hylton’s own commitment to positive, African-centred communal organisations makes it difficult for him to accept that the divisions among African-Caribbeans might be real, and the new African identity imaginary.

### ‘Community’ as a social imaginary

The problems outlined above will be resolved if ‘community’ is treated as a social imaginary in the sense outlined by Castoriadis. Social imaginaries are defined as:

the unceasing and essentially *undetermined* (social-historical and psychical) creation of figures/forms/images, on the basis of which alone there can ever be a question of ‘something’. What we call ‘reality’ and ‘rationality’ are its works  
(Castoriadis 1997 p. 3).

If ‘community’ is treated as one of many social imaginaries created and acted upon as humans go about their business of making and un-making their material lives it becomes clear that, instead of conflating the real and the symbolic dimensions of ‘community’ (or, worse, utilising one or other dimension on its own), sociologists can both keep faith with the use of the term in everyday life and achieve conceptual clarity. One argument for restoring the concept of ‘community’ to a central place in sociology (a place, according to Nisbet (1967), to which it is entitled) is that it provides a means by which sociologists can re-situate their own political commitments<sup>ii</sup>. Advocates of communitarian social policies (Etzioni 1993), feminism (Fraser and Lacey 1993), Afrocentrism (Hylton 1997), libertarian socialism (Farrar 1989) or other ideologies may both reflect upon the social imaginaries that underlie their own academic and social lives and analyse those held by people in whose lives they have research interests. Just as the founders of sociology utilised the discussion of ‘community’ for their own political ends, so should we. The social imaginary termed ‘community’ can be unpacked to reveal a variety of values, goals and fantasies shared, and contested, by sociologists and lay-people. By analytically separating the ‘ideal’ and ‘real’ dimensions of the term community, as used in sociology and in everyday life, we are able to investigate the episodes where people have attempted to put into practice their yearning for consensual, reciprocal and intimate social relationships. Such events may be local, such as the creation of a new youth club, or national/international, as in the formation of large collectivist associations. Observable in such collective efforts is the desire for ‘community’, a desire which entails the effort to institutionalise what Weber

called social relationships of the communal type (Weber 1964 p. 136). In this formulation, ‘community’ is a social imaginary which, when acted upon, has real consequences. It can be mobilised within all types of political discourse. As Roberts (1997) has shown, the term can be claimed as their own by organisations of the political right, centre and left.

‘Community’ is a particularly potent imaginary within the new social movements. Announcing that ‘tribalism’ is now the characteristic feature of ‘mass society’, Maffesoli notes ‘the emergence of the question of the puissance [‘the will to live’] at the heart of the many sparse, splintered communities’ (1996 p. 31). This *puissance*, ‘despite everything confirms the (ever-) renewed game of solidarity and reciprocity’ (ibid. p. 72). Maffesoli may not prove his case that this ‘solidarity and reciprocity’ - key features in the ‘community’ imaginary - are pandemic in western society today, but they are clearly expressed in writings about contemporary movements. Thus, according to George McKay (1998 p. 29), the women’s peace camp at Greenham Common was an ‘expression of resistance through the construction of community’. While Sasha Roseneil (1995) has described the disagreements among the women who established the camp, it is clear from her account that the ethic of women’s solidarity was a central element in the ‘forms/figures/images’ that underpinned their action. Kevin Hetherington’s research identified elements of the radical social imaginary of ‘community’ in his research into the tribe of New Age Travellers in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Hetherington argued that the Travellers had formed a *Bund*: ‘an elective, unstable, charismatic, intensely affectual form of sociation that provides its members with a community of feeling’ (1996 p. 40). Combined with their utopianism (so divergent from more familiar types that Hetherington follows Foucault in naming the spaces they create as ‘heterotopia’), this marks them as advocates of the radical ‘community’ imaginary.

Equally radical are the values underlying Earth First!, the grouping established in Britain during the 1990s. Alex Plows summarises some of its principles as follows:

[The] appreciation of self in nature, a sense of symbiotic connectedness, informs values of cooperation rather than competition, the desire to nurture rather than to exploit. It transcends the (post)modern sense of dislocated isolated self (Plows 1998 p. 165).

Earth First! groups are themselves modelled on Native American Plains Indian Tribes (ibid. p. 153), and, in another sentence reminiscent of Maffesoli, Plows states: ‘For many direct activists the value of nature and self can be described as a spirituality, literally an awareness of spirit, of life force’ (ibid. p. 168) The spiritual and social communion not just of all humans, but of all humans and all other living matter, is the aim of this movement. From an allied grouping, Reclaim the Streets, we hear of mass street parties in 1995-6 where thousands of people created ‘a revolutionary carnival in the spirit of . . . “the Bastille, the Paris Commune, Paris ’68 . . . a topsy-turvy universe free of toil, suffering and inequality”’ (Jordan 1998 p. 140 quoting Phil McLeish). In resisting the M11 link road in east London, terraced houses in Claremont

Road were connected up, thereby establishing ‘a metaphor for communal living’ (ibid. p 136), while the area around Claremont Road, permanently occupied and creatively transformed by protesters, became (in Hakim Bey’s memorable phrase) a ‘temporary autonomous zone’ (ibid. p. 139). Quoting Del Baillie, John Jordan sums up the anti-road protesters and the participants in street carnivals as embodiments of “an expansive desire; for freedom, for creativity; to truly live” (ibid. p. 141).

Of course, this movement is no more united than any other large collection of politically active people. In Plows’ account, for instance, we see evidence of ‘personalism’ within the British ecological movement. Paul Lichterman defines ‘personalism’ as a type of individualism which aims at ‘self-fulfilment and individualised expression, “growth” in personal development rather than growth in purely material well-being’ (Lichterman 1996 p. 6). Plows is critical of the mystical version of this aim but supports the notion that change must take place at the level of the individual person. Far from inhibiting collective political action, Lichterman argues that this provides the basis for solidarity among US Green activists, where that solidarity is derived from personal commitment, rather than the authority of the leader or the Party. Lichterman distinguishes this ‘personalist’ type of collectivity from communitarianism’s definition of ‘true community’. Some British activists criticise those whose ‘personalism’ seems to have gone ‘too far’. In many of the studies in McKay (1998) (ed.) we see the consequences of divergent notions what it means to be part of a collective or communal movement as the precise requirements of individual responsibility and reciprocity are worked through. Another type of critique comes from *Aufheben* (in McKay (1998)) who describe the ‘fluffies’ within the movement as pacifist, mystical and liberal, in contrast with their own version of class conscious, militant anti-capitalism.

Merrick (1997) describes communal living, mass hugging, dropping acid and playing Blake’s ‘Jerusalem’ as the campaigners lived out their defence of the earth at the camps established (in 1996) to resist the Newbury by-pass. With ‘celebratory love in the air’ (ibid. p. 121), the eco-warriors are described as creating ‘actual communities’. But, as with all the other accounts of these ‘actual communities’, the degree of reciprocity and solidarity among the members varies enormously, and the ‘celebratory love’ is not constant. ‘Actual community’ is a productive myth. These events are better understood as practical efforts to realise the most radical definitions of the social imaginary we may call ‘community’.

### **‘Community’ and the black British**

My own work (Farrar 1999b), during which this formulation of ‘community’ as a social imaginary has developed, is on the social movements in the multi-cultural, inner-city area of Leeds known as Chapeltown. In much of the research on the areas in British cities where black people have settled since the 1950s the notion of ‘community’ is treated unproblematically (Rex and Moore 1967, Pryce 1979/1986, Rex and Tomlinson 1979, Hylton 1997). Pryce chided ‘romantics’ for imagining St. Paul’s, Bristol as a ‘tight-knit, friendly, organic, warm, harmonious community’ (1986 p. 29). Rex pointed out

that the word ‘community’ had been placed in the title of the Sparkbrook study (1967) by the directors of the Survey of Race Relations ‘who were anxious that community would triumph over conflict’. He went on to assert that, having studied Handsworth, ‘the optimistic analysis no longer holds . . . conflict is triumphing over community’ (Rex and Tomlinson 1979 pp. 241-2). These authors implicitly acknowledge the imaginary and ideological uses of the concept of ‘community’ but continue to treat it as though it is to be understood as (at least potentially) a real thing.

Another study, however, points towards the conceptualisation of ‘community’ argued in this article. In her research into the lives of black young men in London, Claire Alexander (1996) suggests that the ‘community’ of black people ‘[a]t its most abstract, as an “imagined community” provides a source of solidarity in opposition to wider white society, which can be mobilised to act collectively and politically’ (ibid. p. 69). Alexander’s young men could be interpreted as deploying ‘black community’ as a social imaginary. But the ‘self-inventions’ of these young men ‘were rarely aimed . . . at any collective “political” mobilisation, although they were crucially founded upon a series of collective images’ (ibid. p. 193). Thus, Alexander found them to be devoid of any overt political orientations, but their ‘blackness’ provided them with a symbolic link to a section of society (fellow blacks in Britain) whose peculiar position in the Diaspora inevitably infused their lives with political meaning.

In my work in Chapeltown over the past three decades I have identified the use of ‘community’ as a metaphor for local people’s image of a new social settlement, one based on justice, autonomy and the re-allocation of resources to people on low incomes (Farrar 1996, 1997, 1999a). ‘Community’ is interpreted as a portmanteau for the yearning for radical change, a metaphor encapsulating local people’s desire to escape the constraints of racism and poverty. Conjured up as ‘a heart in a heartless world’ (Cohen 1997 p. 46) it motivates, among other forms of action, political struggle of various types. In the final part of this article, I will outline how I arrived at this conclusion.

My starting point was a rejection of positivist epistemology and an adoption of a politically partisan sociology. Following Weber’s view that ‘knowledge of cultural events is inconceivable except on the basis of *significance* . . . it is decided according to value-ideas in the light of which we view “culture” in each individual case’ (Weber 1949 p. 80, italics as in original), and Marx’s dictum that ‘the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it’ (Marx, 1845, italics as in original) I decided in 1972 to simultaneously study and actively support the Chapeltown Community Association. As my commitment to libertarian socialist activism grew at the expense of my neo-Weberian sociology, the formal research soon came to a halt. But it was stopped by an intellectual problem as well. I became aware that I had no satisfactory theoretical framework with which I could understand what ‘community’ meant. It was constantly invoked in the title and the writings of the Community Association and by the organisers of the protests I witnessed and supported throughout the 1970s. Organised by groups such as the United Caribbean Association, the West Indian Afro Brotherhood, the Community Association and the Sikh organisations, waves

of militant activity were launched under the banner of 'community'. I searched the sociological literature. I found I was bored by the community studies collected in Frankenberg (1966) and demoralised by the conclusions reached by Bell and Newby (1971). But the absence of a viable theory of community did not seem to undermine the practice of 'community politics'. Those of us who were influenced by Marxism, Anarchism and/or Black Power found quite enough there as a theoretical resource.

This biographical detour is justified firstly to emphasise that sociology is not engaged-in impartially; that research topics are legitimately chosen on the basis of value-stances held by the researchers; and that the process of research may, as it did in my case, result in the abandonment of the discipline when it seems to lack the tools required to further the researcher's intellectual and cultural-political interests. Secondly, I want to highlight the way that sociology unfolds, like everyday life, through the work of embodied subjects as we grapple with the discursive and material constraints we encounter.

In the everyday, often convulsive, politics of 'community action', however, definitions of community and the epistemologies of sociology seemed beside the point. Many African-Caribbeans, and the sizeable clique of white people in Chapeltown who engaged in radical campaigning in the early 1970s, raised demands such as the eradication of racism and material improvements at a local school; the provision of play facilities and safe streets; the wholesale refurbishment of council housing; local control over services such as a children's nursery and the community centre; proper street cleaning services and so on (Farrar 1988, 1992). In one protracted campaign in 1974 for the right to wear their turbans while working on the buses, men and women organised by the Indian Workers Association, with less militant support from the Sikh Temple, engaged in a public demonstration and threatened another before their demands were conceded. In 1975, however, public action of another sort took place. On Bonfire Night, in the first event of its kind in Britain, young African-Caribbeans launched a ferocious attack on the police, causing large amounts of damage and very seriously injuring two officers. None of the well-established Caribbean organisations were willing to publicly support the youth, eleven of whom were arrested and charged, despite indictments of police brutality and racism made by the United Caribbean Association only a few years earlier. Some support was finally organised by an ad-hoc group of young black women (former 'Brotherhood' members) at the time of their trial in June-July 1976. But no support emerged at all for those who burned down several of the buildings on Chapeltown Road over two nights, variously described as rioting or uprising, in July 1981 (Farrar 1981, 1999a).

The type of politics engendered in the 1970s which, I have argued, conformed quite closely to the criteria established by Manuel Castells (1983) for distinguishing urban social movements, appeared to have disappeared. 'Community' as an imagined unity had been exposed as a chimera. Throughout the 1980s, the Harehills and Chapeltown Liaison Committee, organised and run by the city council replaced autonomous organisation of the type that Castells called 'community movements' making 'collective

consumption' demands (ibid. pp. 319-321). Instead, the notion was promoted that 'actual community' was to be enhanced by the provision of separate social and religious facilities for each ethnic group, along with the provision of some collective services such as house improvement, traffic-calming and such like. Independent radical action did, however, reappear in occupations and demonstrations in the latter part of the 1980s and early 1990s, but these were partial and contradictory, and never attained the wider support of those in the early 1970s.

Witnessing and supporting these campaigns throughout this period I remained puzzled by the persistence of the signifier 'community' when its emptiness seemed increasingly apparent. The impossibility of creating widespread solidarity despite the efforts of the campaign groups, the increasing prominence of 'ethnic absolutism' (Gilroy 1987 p. 59), the growth of an individualised, professionalised stratum of black people unwilling to engage in public politics, the predatory activities of a small group of nihilistic street criminals . . . overall, social fragmentation seemed to characterise Chapeltown in the late 1980s and 1990s. The idea of 'community as process' emerged out of these observations. It seemed plausible to argue that 'community' was created in some periods and it retreated in others. But I came to see that the problem with this formulation was that 'community' was still being treated as though it were a real thing.

It would be wrong to suggest that the data alone was provoking these thoughts. My original theoretical-political presuppositions were always at work. I needed a way to make sense of my own value-stance and the political events with which I had engaged. To adopt the realist approach, to see 'community' as a 'thing' which we had in the 1970s and lost in the 1980s and 1990s would, apart from opening myself to accusations of nostalgia, challenge my own values and force me to reconsider decades of political engagement. This has, to some extent happened. I have adopted a 'subtle realist' (Hammersley 1992) account of the construction and de-construction of 'community' in Chapeltown which does employ the 'fall from grace' trope, at least as a narrative device. On the other hand, there are sound political and intellectual reasons for refusing the objectifying tendencies inherent in realism. While 'community' continues to operate discursively in Chapeltown, the fact that its empirical meaning is never spelled out by local activists, or by the city council, is striking. It is a fine example of the absent presence. 'Community' works by implying an ideal, but absent future (or past) in contrast to the grim reality of the present. In so far as its meaning is made to seem explicit, it is employed in couplets such as 'the Muslim community', or 'the African-Caribbean community'. But these 'actual communities' dissolve to their particularities as soon as they are interrogated. Its absence as a fully explicated unit of discourse in everyday language in Chapeltown is, I would suggest, deliberate. Everyone knows that they don't know what it means. Theoretically, therefore, 'community' only becomes a coherent concept if it is treated in Castoriadis' terms as a social imaginary. As a 'figure/ form/image' 'community' is intelligible as a particular type of moral-political postulate, an effort to 'bind the future' (Bauman 1993 p. 44). In an undetermined, indeterminable present and future, such bids may only be stated in the

vaguest terms. ‘Community as process’ captures part of this. ‘Community as a social imaginary’, however, allows us to simultaneously grasp the symbolic and the real. Symbolically, ‘community’ stands for the yearning for a better life. This dream is implemented, in ‘actual community’ in so far as various degrees of intimacy and solidarity are practised. Put in this way, sociologists are compelled to investigate the specific contents of that imaginary, and its practical consequences.

While the contents are not made explicit in popular discourse, they circulate continually in political practice in Chapeltown. They are open to sociological interpretation. I have chosen to describe ‘community’ as a ‘radical’ social imaginary in Chapeltown because the focus of my own activity, *qua* activist and researcher, has been political, and the demand throughout the last thirty years has always been for radical change. I have bracketed off another important set of meanings entailed in other uses of the ‘community’ imaginary, which could be summarised as ‘religious’. In the varieties of Christianity, Islam and Sikhism practised in Chapeltown by large numbers of people, the yearning for a new life of spiritual communion is intensely expressed. This has been manifested in material form as the years have passed in the increasingly successful efforts by Christians, Sikhs and Muslims to establish buildings in which the various denominations of their faiths may be practised. Within the field of politics, at the risk of over-simplifying, the meanings entailed within the ‘community’ imaginary varied from revolutionary to reformist and they varied in terms of their ethnic particularism and their inclusivity. Broadly speaking, in the early period, inclusivist and revolutionary meanings were highly visible, while in the later period reformist and particularist meanings predominated. By this I mean that ‘community’ once signified the view that it would be realised only by wholesale social and economic change, resulting in full equality and democracy for all ethnic groups. In the later period, ‘community’ signified the amelioration of social problems and specific provision for each ethnic group. There seems to have been a move from a universalist definition of ‘community’ to a particularist one. Throughout this period, however, the invocation of ‘community’ served as a banner for the mobilisation of demands for social justice, the end of racism and the redistribution of resources in favour of the poor. It was the term which summarised the yearning for radical and progressive social change, employed by people for whom the theoretical and political lexicon of all varieties of political party seemed irrelevant. Defined in varying ways at various periods over the past thirty years, the demand that Better Mus’ Come for the peoples of Chapeltown resonates still.

## **Conclusion**

This article has suggested a way out of the confusion evident in many sociological examinations of ‘community’. It has argued for an analytical distinction between realist and idealist definitions of the term, maintaining that the starting point should be the recognition of ‘community’ as a social imaginary, as defined by Castoriadis (1997). If ‘community’ is understood as a figuration, a set of symbols with which people give imaginative definition to their yearning for supportive, reciprocal and intimate social relationships, the

real consequences of the enactment of this dream should become the subject for empirical investigation. 'Community' refuses the injunction to disappear from our conceptual apparatus because of its capacity to signify human longing for a better life without ever having to face the challenge of defining precisely what might constitute that new life. As such, it is a potent mobiliser of cultural and political action. This, at least, is the conclusion drawn from its use within contemporary social movements and from a long-term study of a multi-cultural inner area of a British city. Since it is the ultimate in slippery signifiers, other researchers may well find that, as a social imaginary, it is deployed to capture alternative 'figures/forms/images'.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> I follow, here, Bauman's (1993 p. 44) view that the 'moral community . . . is always the matter of one postulate set against other postulates; a programme, a bid to bind the future'. He emphasises that community is 'postulated contentiously'. It is because 'community' should be treated as a 'contentious postulate', rather than as a 'thing' that it appears in inverted commas in this article.

<sup>ii</sup> It is because I argue that sociology is inescapably political, and should present itself accordingly, that I disagree with Crowe and Allan (1995 pp. 148-9) when they argue that 'community should be studied in a 'non-evaluative and on-evolutionary way'.

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