

Paper presented to 'Class, Space and Community - A Workshop Conference'
Department of Sociology and Social Policy
University of Durham –
6th to 8th April 2001.

Re-thinking 'community' as a utopian social imaginary

Max Farrar,
School of Cultural Studies
Leeds Metropolitan University

Introduction

This paper is based on a journal article which I'm hawking (Farrar 2001 (a)), and the ideas in it are derived from thirty years as a political activist and writer/photographer in the multi-cultural, inner-city area of Leeds, UK, known as Chapeltown. Over the past eight years I have attempted to reconfigure my identity, as postmodernity demands, I fear, of us all, into one which hovers uneasily around the term 'academic sociologist', so I've recently written up my observations and theorising in the form of a PhD which will fairly soon see the light of day as a book (Farrar 2001 (b)). As I think is the case for all of us at this conference, the issue, for me, of how to respond to the tumultuous changes in the social, economic and political re-configuration of capitalism over the past thirty years is not simply an intellectual exercise. We want to know: what is to be done? Lenin asked the right question, though, in my opinion, the parties which took his name provided the wrong answer. I hope I am in the spirit of this conference if I therefore veer between the academic issues at stake and the political ones.

The abstracts helpfully circulated prior to our meeting made me ask myself precisely what concept of 'class' and what concept of 'community' we are operating with. By the time I read this paper, I expect that we will have clarified this, but I want to spell out now how I think we should approach the concept of community, and to suggest some of the political implications of the model I

propose. I will say something at the end about how this notion of community might impact on our concept of class, and we might apply it politically.

On the concept of 'community'

Reviewing some of the voluminous literature on 'community', I came to the conclusion that there were epistemological confusions which clouded our understanding of the topic, and which had resulted in the suggestion that the term be abandoned within sociology. Some of you will recall Ray Pahl's argument that the word "community" serves more to confuse than illuminate the situation in Britain' (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). When I read this in the mid-1990s, I have to tell you that I was pretty pissed off. After 25 years of community-based political action, I felt a bit like I did as a teenager when people told me I'd stop being a socialist as soon as I grew up. But it made me wonder why, if the idea was irredeemably flawed in academe, had no-one in the real world noticed its fatal defects? Reading the statement again for this paper, I realise that a clue lies in the dismissive pay-off from Savage and Warde: the term is used ideologically. My argument is that that is just one of the reasons why it has, and should, survive as a concept with enormous intellectual and political potential.

The epistemological confusion in the sociological theorisation of 'community' lies in the failure to distinguish its two uses, which derive from the competing paradigms of idealism and realism. If you look back on the community studies of the 1950s and 1960s you see that they were pretty much untroubled by theory. In their 1971 book *Community Studies* Bell and Newby made it clear that this absence of theory was a serious problem. After noting that the American sociologist George A Hillery had identified 94 different definitions of the term 'community', Bell and Newby offered three key components of most definitions: area, common ties and social

interaction. I think it's fairly clear from this period in community research that the underlying paradigm is that of realism: the task, as these researchers see it, is to map out, empirically, what is happening to social interactions in a particular geographical area. Leaving aside the questions of reliability and validity that such studies are bound to pose, most of us will agree that this is an important and worthwhile task. We need the data, if I can borrow a phrase from the number-crunchers, and the information which claims the status of fact provided in many of the papers at this conference (and, I would argue, in my own research) is highly significant and useful.

But another, rather different, approach to the concept of community has also been present in the research into particular locales which has been published over the years. This one is based in the epistemology which is broadly defined as idealist. It's the approach which is philosophically critical of realism, which usually rejects its methodology as positivist, and which is mainly concerned with the patterns of thought, values and meanings of the humans who occupy the territory under investigation. This approach is well summarised in the title of Anthony Cohen's 1985 book *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. What has confounded the discussion of this term, I think, is that the realist and the idealist paradigms have been employed simultaneously without proper recognition of the crucial differences both in conceptualisation and in political implications between them. I doubt, for instance, that Cohen would accept the notion that his work was idealist, and it clearly is not, in that his aim (successfully achieved, in my view) is to do the realist job mentioned above: to describe and analyse the locality he is studying. But his focus of interest, what others have called 'the mental maps' that people hold, derives from the interpretivist tradition in sociology which for me is best represented by Max Weber's work. Mentioning Weber in the context of idealism is to show how complex the debate between realism and idealism actually is. Only the most vicious of the Marxists would denounce Weber as an idealist. In fact, he was wonderfully adept at moving between the two paradigms, as, I think, all great sociology does. But it is important to note the origins of the subjectivist tradition in sociology in

idealist ontology and epistemology. Robert Nisbet's magisterial summary of what he took to be the key concepts in sociology managed to combine the realist and idealist paradigms in the way he defined one of these key concepts, that 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 fulfillment 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).

Although I have to confess that, as a revolting student, I ceased to take any notice of Nisbet as soon as I heard that he was a conservative, it seems to me now that he captured something crucial about the way that the term is used, both in sociology and in everyday life – as a 'fusion of feeling and thought . . . of membership and volition' expressed not only in a locality or occupation, but in ideological ventures such as identifying humans in racial categories. Nisbet correctly identifies 'community' as an extraordinarily supple concept which has both subjectivist elements (thought and feeling) and real, material dimensions (work, crusades). The problem, however, is that he doesn't make it clear enough that this way of defining community only produces a viable basis for investigating the networks of solidarity and division among 'actual' human groups if we separate out the two epistemologies at work.

The Grahams Crow and Allan have set out a slightly different kind of distinction to the one I'm making here. They identify 'broadly geographical, social structural and interpretative dimensions of community' and argue for a fourth, the temporal, in

order to stress 'the dynamic nature of community formation and development' (1995 pp. 147-8). The trouble with this, I suggest, is that they seem to confine the interpretive dimension within the realist paradigm. Like Anthony Cohen, they want to include within the parameters of community research proper attention to the symbolic maps of community that people construct. As I have said, that is a perfectly proper and useful goal. Separating out the two paradigms, however, allows us to make a further development in our understanding and application of the concept of 'community'.

The utopian social imaginary

So I want to pursue another path, which involves a greater engagement with the idealist tradition than most left-oriented sociologists feel comfortable with. One of the puzzles I faced throughout my involvement in social movements in the multi-ethnic inner city was the repetition of the word 'community' in a neighbourhood which became increasingly fragmented and particularised as the Thatcher government did its work, and as the Labour council performed its neo-colonial policy of divide and rule. I began to realise that 'community' was merely a flag waved to mobilise the troops. It seemed to be, to borrow a term from the postmodernists, an empty signifier, a subjective construction with no real content or meaning at all. At its worst, it was an utterly bogus device used by self-appointed leaders to claim credibility, and grants, for narrow and self-serving ends. The interesting thing was, however, that there was a sense in which everyone, including the council and the so-called 'community leaders' knew that this was a game being played with stage armies and paper slogans. A curious form of subjectivism was in play – a fantasy of 'community' played out on an imaginary stage. But of course these mental manoeuvres had very real consequences. So in writing up the twenty-five or so years of activist observation in the neighbourhood I employed a realist epistemology in attempting the chart the rhetoric and actions deployed under the flag of 'community'.

What also became clear, as the years rolled by, was that there was another layer to this term, which I have to say I was never able to capture in an unprovoked statement from anyone in the locale. It is expressed in the title of one of bell hooks' (1992) collections of essays: *Yearning*. 'Community', I argued in the thesis, is most productively thought of as a metaphorical expression which captures people's irrepressible desire for positive social transformation. (I think, nowadays, that I should say it is metonymical, not metaphorical.) The term stands in for the longing for intimate, warm, supportive social relationships, relationships which are based on mutuality and equality of worth. These, I think, are the essential underpinning values of socialism. In this perspective, 'community' has nothing to do with the reality of actually existing social relationships, except in so far as the term is a poorly-defined critique of those relationships. Treating 'community' quite separately within an idealist epistemology allows us to put aside the impossible question of whether or not 'community' actually exists in a particular workplace, neighbourhood, region, nation or on the internet. It allows us to investigate the other meaning of the word 'ideal' – what people think of as an ideal form of society.

This approach rests philosophically on the position outlined by Cornelius Castoriadis in his *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Castoriadis argued that 'the real' is actually formed by human applications of social imaginaries. He defines these 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).

'Community', I suggest, is one of the foundational social imaginaries of human society. It is the figure, the image, the form from which we construct our yearning for a meaningful, humane, and just social existence – and it is the form, therefore, which underlies the extraordinarily persistent efforts of people of all

shapes and sizes, in all kinds of workplaces and neighbourhoods to put that desire into practice. 'Community', in this sense of the word, is the opposite of the alienation that Marx identified as the actual existence of the human being under capitalism, the opposite of what Durkheim identified as anomie, the opposite of Weber's iron cage. This is an unashamedly idealist conception of 'community'. I think we have to acknowledge that the notion of 'community' as 'yearning' will not necessarily be revealed in the everyday mental maps that are revealed in the conversations we have and the activities we observe when we employ the realist epistemology on which our research is usually based. (Of course, my argument will collapse if, were we to go out and ask people to talk in these terms, they refuse to acknowledge this hidden dimension.) The formulation of 'community' I am proposing sits comfortably alongside Michel Maffesoli's claim that *puissance*, the will to live, is the 'the organising principle of life', the feature which underpins the inevitable, unstoppable resistance by humans to the depredations of capital (Maffesoli 1996 p. 34). You'll now see why the word utopian appears in the title of this paper: I think that humans hold within them the irrepressible will to live in mutuality and justice.

Brief remarks on class and politics

Traditional class-based theory and practice will quickly condemn this formulation as reminiscent of the idealist anarchists whom Marx denounced, and they may even claim it has affinities with the communitarians. I welcome the former association and deny the latter. And I want to make one further provocation. I think it is helpful to understand 'class' as a social imaginary. This is not to deny the material dimensions of life which are properly identified when the concept of class is deployed. The formulation of class in both the Marxist and the Weberian traditions have been crucial in allowing academics and political activists to demonstrate the real conditions of inequality – of power, wealth, income and status – which give the lie to the malicious and mystifying claim that capitalism is the best of all possible worlds. But one of the reasons why it is so hard to

maintain the language of class both within academic and political circles in the twenty-first centuries is that the material dimensions of class do not have the salience that they did for huge sections of the populations of the overdeveloped West only thirty years ago. Even in an objectively low-income area like Chapeltown, 'class' is not the concept first reached for by ordinary people or by activists. This is not to be explained simply by the heightened salience of the concept of 'race' in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood. It is because even low-income people now maintain the life-styles that were, when they were young, thought of as middle-class. Don't get me wrong: I'm not talking here about that section of the population who live in houses which have not received a regular wage for dozens of years. Not even the most optimistic BBC programme could persuade anyone that people living permanently outside the structures of waged work are middle-class. (Although there's an interesting question to be asked here about how to class-ify successful criminals, many of whom maintain close links with low-income neighbourhoods but who live in middle class areas.)

But 'class' will continue to be utilised in our academic and political vocabulary, just as 'community' will, so long as we live in a type of society in which injustice and inequality, with their deformative effects on the quality of our relationships with each other, persist. The imaginary of class will continue to preoccupy us precisely because it provides the social imaginary upon which a section of society manufactures class divisions. It operates also to energise the social imaginary of 'classlessness' upon which another section of society mobilises its supporters in the struggle to overturn those divisions.

I hope it's clear that I'm searching here for a way of thinking about the social which satisfies our demand as sociologists for intellectual rigour, and our demand as citizens for radical social change. Both 'community' and 'class' are concepts which many of our academic colleagues regard as the antiquated trappings of Enlightenment thought, now being swept aside by their postmodern theory. Interestingly, while the concept of 'class' also takes a pounding in all political circles apart from those of the far left and the far right, the concept of 'community'

has had something of a revival, thanks to the efforts of the sociologists and philosophers of communitarianism, with whom Tony Blair's Christian Socialism has some affinity. This is not a good reason for radicals to jettison the term. It results from, as Raymond Williams observed, the unique capacity of the term to be given positive connotations by almost all shades of opinion. But it has gained that status not simply because it is ready-made for the harlots of politics. Its real status derives from the fact that it is lodged in the minds of ordinary people as a metonym for their longing for a decent life.

I will close by suggesting that embracing that utopian social imaginary called 'community' both within sociology and within our political networks provides a productive basis for work to transform globalised, neo-liberal capitalism. It speaks to universal human demands which transcend the narrow categories of 'race', 'class' and gender. I'm making an even more daring claim here. It is not self-evident that the people who seem to gain most from the cleavages of 'race', class and gender, and the inequalities and injustices which they so assiduously perpetuate, have the remotest interest in 'community' in its utopian definition. But I think (and this I believe is consistent with the young Marx's theory of alienation) that there is a very real possibility that their 'actual condition' is one of acute psychic distress, which is only partially covered by their material comforts. Their rhetorical commitment to family and community (which they hardly ever manage to embody in their own lives) is the trace of their need to escape this distress. Of course, the utopian notion of community is much more evident in the struggles of those who reject the material benefits that are available to them in capitalism, or who lack all access to those rewards. It's displayed in the radical and utopian elements in youth cultures, in aspects of consumer cultures, and in those work cultures where people still manage to support each other rather than the boss. It is already an expressed demand within some of the anti-capitalist movements. It is a formulation of 'community' which immediately provokes questions such as 'what are the material bases for intimacy, warmth and mutuality?', 'what would a just and equal society look like?' These are the central questions for people in

everyday life, of all ages, genders, ethnicities and classes. They are key questions for sociologists, as well.

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3,235 words

9 April, 2001