

Symbolic Construction of Community

Cohen, Anthony P.



THE SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNITY

KEYIDEAS

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THE SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNITY

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London and New York

First published in 1985 by Ellis Horwood Ltd
and Tavistock Publications Ltd

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 0-415-04616-5 (Print Edition)

ISBN 0-203-13168-1 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-18305-3 (Glassbook Format)

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Editor's Foreword

The concept of community has been one of the most compelling and attractive themes in modern social science, and at the same time one of the most elusive to define. It is in some ways tempting to view the recent attempts of some schools of Western sociology to announce the 'end' of community as a symptom of irritability with the unending definitional tangles created by this apparently elegant but infuriatingly slippery notion. Perhaps such a response is hardly surprising when one remembers that even as early as the mid-1950s an enterprising American sociologist had uncovered more than 90 discrete definitions of the term in use within the social sciences. Such enviable dexterity with the card-index could be discounted as grist to the scholarly mill were it not for the remarkable hold that the idea of community exerts over both the intellectual and popular mind. For whilst the conceptual ashes of community were being offered to the wind by sociologists and anthropologists of a radical or structuralist disposition, people throughout the Western world in modern industrialized societies were aggressively asserting their locality and ethnicity, their membership of *communities* which were real enough for them if not for those who ought to be studying them.

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Community is, then, one of the *Key Ideas* of the social sciences, whether as a concept to be employed in the study of human societies or as an ideological notion which diverts attention away from the hard and large-scale forces which control peoples' lives – as Richard Sennett has expressively termed it, 'destructive gemeinschaft'. The concept – if for a moment we may be allowed to describe it as such – provides both a means of encompassing a wide variety of social processes and an idea which has much more than simply *technical* meaning, for it refers to symbols, values and ideologies which have popular currency. People manifestly *believe* in the notion of community, either as ideal or reality, and sometimes as both simultaneously. Now, as the American sociologist W. I. Thomas observed, if people believe a thing to be real, then it is real in its consequences for them. This duality of the concept is at the heart of the conceptual confusion to which it gives rise. The reality of 'community spirit', the sense of belonging which people exhibit to a small-scale social and cultural entity which is bigger than the 'family' but yet less impersonal than the bureaucracy or work organization, has sat uneasily alongside the attempts of sociologists and anthropologists to locate a structural dimension to *communitas*. This duality has also been overlain by a veneer of evaluative and ideological elements – community as 'normative prescription' has all too frequently interfered with 'empirical description' to the extent that a systematic sociology of community has proved to be impossible to construct.

The 'core' or *key* nature of the idea or concept of community reflects, then, both an undercurrent of social process and cultural meaning which is constantly present in modern societies, and a perennial problem for social science. Community continues to be of both a practical and an ideological significance to most people, and is thus an important area of study for the social sciences – despite prognostications to the contrary by those who see in the concept something which obscures the all-important structural dimension of class in social action. The study of community will continue to be necessary as long as local relationships play an important part in peoples' lives, for we have a long way to go until we are all part of a McLuhanesque 'global village', or feel that the only determining feature of our social lives is our relationship to the means of production and membership of a social class.

Anthony Cohen's book on the Symbolic Construction of Community is the first in the series of volumes on *Key Ideas* in the social sciences, and it is fitting that the series should begin by focusing on a theme of such classic proportions. His book is an argument for the continued centrality

of *community* as a key concept of the social sciences, uniting as it does sociology and social anthropology, His concern is not to rehash the stale debates about structural definitions of *Gemeinschaft*, nor to situate the study of communities in a context which subordinates localism or ethnicity to macro-social forces such as class, rationalization or universalism. Rather, he sets out to deal with community as it is symbolically constructed, as a system of values, norms, and moral codes which provides a sense of identity within a bounded whole to its members. This emphasis on *meaning* neatly sidesteps the definitional problems posed by the search for a structural model of community as a specific form of social organization. It demonstrates that structures do not, in themselves, create meaning for people and thus provides an effective answer to the question of why so many of the organizations designed to create 'community' as palliatives to anomie and alienation are doomed to failure.

Dr. Cohen provides much in the way of case-study material to illustrate the stages of his argument, and covers a wide range of examples to demonstrate the centrality of the symbolic dimension of community as its defining characteristic. These examples, culled from a marvellous range of ethnographic and sociological studies of specific communities, speak eloquently of the diversity of structural forms within which a sense of belonging to a *local* social context occur. Rather than being the sign of a traditional and outmoded social structure, the cultural experience of community as a bounded symbolic whole is something virtually universal in both non-industrial *and* industrial societies, transcending even the macro-social forces of capitalism and socialism in their many variations.

In focusing on the symbolic dimension of community, Dr. Cohen offers a way out of the impasse created by the search for a structurally-based definition, one which has created the impression that community is a uniquely 'traditional' social relationship, to be contrasted with the social forms of the 'modern' – exemplified by the impersonal, urbanized, rationalized, and class-based social structures of industrial society. As Dr. Cohen concludes, the issue to be faced in the study of community is not whether its structural limits have withstood the onslaught of social change, but whether its members are able to infuse its culture with vitality, and to construct a symbolic community which provides meaning and identity.

Peter Hamilton
February 1985

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Introduction

SYMBOLISM AND BOUNDARY

'Community' is one of those words – like 'culture', 'myth', 'ritual', 'symbol' – bandied around in ordinary, everyday speech, apparently readily intelligible to speaker and listener, which, when imported into the discourse of social science, however, causes immense difficulty. Over the years it has proved to be highly resistant to satisfactory definition in anthropology and sociology, perhaps for the simple reason that all definitions contain or imply theories, and the theory of community has been very contentious. At its most extreme, the debate has thrown up ideologically opposed propositions which are equally untenable. For example, it used to be claimed that modernity and community are irreconcilable, that the characteristic features of community cannot survive industrialization and urbanization. It is a spurious argument for its opposition of 'community' and 'modernity' rests only upon ascribing stipulatively to community those features of social life which are supposed, by definition, to be lacking from modernity! Moreover, it is an argument which unjustifiably claims the authority of such seminal scholars as Durkheim, Weber, Tönnies and Simmel – unjustifiably because, as I shall argue, it perpetrates a misinterpretation, or highly selective reading, of these earlier writers. Others have suggested that the

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domination of modern social life by the state, and the essential confrontation of classes in capitalist society, have made 'community' a nostalgic, bourgeois and anachronistic concept. Once again, the argument is based entirely upon a highly particularistic and sectarian definition. However, its redundancy can be claimed not only on philosophical grounds, but also as being evident in the massive upsurge of community consciousness – in such terms as ethnicity, localism, religion, and class itself – which has swept the 'modern' world in recent years.

There is no attempt made in this book to formulate yet another definition. Rather, it is proposed to follow Wittgenstein's advice and seek not lexical meaning, but *use*. A reasonable interpretation of the word's use would seem to imply two related suggestions: that the members of a group of people (a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups. 'Community' thus seems to imply simultaneously both similarity and difference. The word thus expresses a *relational* idea: the opposition of one community to others or to other social entities. Indeed, it will be argued that the use of the word is only occasioned by the desire or need to express such a distinction. It seems appropriate, therefore, to focus our examination of the nature of community on the element which embodies this sense of discrimination, namely, the *boundary*.

By definition, the boundary marks the beginning and end of a community. But why is such marking necessary? The simple answer is that the boundary encapsulates the identity of the community and, like the identity of an individual, is called into being by the exigencies of social interaction. Boundaries are marked because communities interact in some way or other with entities from which they are, or wish to be, distinguished (see Barth, 1969). The manner in which they are marked depends entirely upon the specific community in question. Some, like national or administrative boundaries, may be statutory and enshrined in law. Some may be physical, expressed, perhaps, by a mountain range or a sea. Some may be racial or linguistic or religious. But not all boundaries, and not *all* the components of *any* boundary, are so objectively apparent. They may be thought of, rather, as existing in the minds of their beholders. This being so, the boundary may be perceived in rather different terms, not only by people on opposite sides of it, but also by people on the same side.

We are talking here about what the boundary means to people, or, more precisely, about the meanings they give to it. This is the *symbolic* aspect of community boundary and, in so far as we aspire to understand the importance of the community in people's experience, it is the most