

What is this Thing Called Community? A Communication Perspective[#]

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Abstract

Large Australian mining companies seem to be incorporating the development principles and practice adopted by the International Council of Mines and Metals to “contribute to the social, economic and institutional development of the communities in which [they] operate” and by the Australian Minerals Industry Code of Environmental Management. Yet, apart from two studies of limited scope undertaken for the Australian component of the MMSD project (Cheney et al. 2002; URS Consulting 2002), the issues surrounding the concept of community have not yet attracted much research attention.

The joint ARC research project of the Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining and the UQ Business School has provided an opportunity to consider the notion of community theoretically and empirically. Under closer scrutiny, ‘community’ seems to operate well as a warm and nostalgic notion (Burkett 2001). However, our research finds some problems with this comfortable notion. For example, empirical research so far suggests that ‘communities of interest’ is more appropriate. Implicated in this notion are relations of power (Whiteman and Mamen 2002) and social identity (Abrams and Hogg 1990; van Dick 2001).

This paper uses empirical and theoretical perspectives to devise appropriate communication responses in the light of a fuller concept of community.

Introduction

This paper has been written because of my involvement in research that considers the mineral industry’s involvement in community engagement. Of course, this immediately involves the question of what *community* is, because the form of engagement undertaken by companies will depend not only on the company’s understanding of community but also, given companies’ responsiveness to stakeholders, on the ‘community’s’ perception of itself. I don’t use any of the empirical data that we are collecting from the eight mining sites in the three-year project. However, the question certainly began to form very strongly as I went about the process of interviewing people. To be honest, I began to form a rather cynical hypothesis that community might be considered mostly as nothing more than coalitions of disaffection. For someone who always considered himself to be a collectivist and communitarian opposed

[#] As this is a preliminary draft of a paper, could you please not quote from it without first contacting me.

strongly to the neo-liberal hegemony in contemporary society, this came as something of a shock.

The paper is in three parts. The first part looks generally from a philosophical perspective at the theory of community. The second part looks at more specific conceptualisations of community. The third part then considers the likely political (i.e. corporate and government) expressions of those community types.

Philosophical perspective

Broadly, I reduce the philosophical foundation of community into three broad areas: liberal, communitarian and postmodern. Already there are difficulties, e.g. where would one place the Marxist-turned-Thomist philosopher, Alisdair MacIntyre, or the liberal John Dewey, both of whom I incorporate in the communitarian camp. As well, I have not identified the conservative position. In summary, it could be said that the conservative position as expressed by Burke and Hegel, is less enthusiastic about rights than about tradition and authority mediated through the institutions of family, nation, school, and church. For them, so long as these institutions are upheld, people can express their individuality. Thus, the conservative generally upholds economic individualism and institutional collectivism. Nonetheless, I will use this division as I believe that it provides useful differences that produce different conceptions of the social object and subject, guiding moral principles, and justifications for (in)action.

The *liberal* conception of community, in this paper, is best understood as a set of antithetical characteristics:¹

- Liberal:
 - Private
 - Market economy
 - Individual
 - Enterprise
- Communitarian:
 - Public
 - State intervention
 - Social
 - Constraint.

Within the contemporary neo-liberal hegemony, given its close association of the subject with *homo economicus* (Rose 1992), it is inevitable that community is closely associated with economic outcomes individually. Naturalist agency, where people “are agents of their own action, with behaviour made predictable by their unconstrained self-interest” (Dixon et al. 2005, p. 8), or the ‘autonomous subject’ (Bell 1993, p. 29) is the assumed subject position

¹ These are selected from a larger list of characteristics provided by Jennings (1993, p. 123).

within liberal theory.² As a result the liberal concept of community is “freedom from constraint” (Champlin 1997, p. 581). The more libertarian liberal espouses both a normative and methodological individualism. Normative individualism identifies individualism as the ontological purpose of life. This is most strongly put by Buchanan whose Public Choice theory assumes that the public interest “is what the individual says it is” and also rejects any sense of collectivity (Marginson 1992, p. 52). In this sense, Buchanan’s theory is quite distinct from the conservative position that identifies the collectivising elements of family, nation, school, and religion as the foundations of society. Methodological individualism identifies the constructing of social reality solely in terms of the individual, not in collective terms, such as ‘society’. Thatcher, for example, declared that there is no such thing as society (Jarvis 1998, p. 44). This is most clearly seen in *Positive and Classical Economics*, which founds its ‘science’ on the presumed behaviour of individuals. Neo-liberal economist, Milton Friedman, and Public Choice political theorist, James Buchanan, are both normative and methodological individualists. Friedman (1962) states that “freedom of the individual, or perhaps the family” is identified as the primary goal of his philosophy in *Capitalism and Freedom* (p. 12).

Communitarianism delineates itself on the crucial ontological issue of whether social life and personal identity are understood in the atomist terms of liberalism or “in terms of shared goods, of language and other factors that cannot be accounted for by nor reduced to individuals”, the “irreducibly social” understanding of communitarians (Abbey and Taylor 1996, p. 3). Simons (1996) agrees, claiming that “the ontological issue for liberalism is the primacy of individual rights and freedom”, while for communitarians it “is primacy of community life and the good of collectivities” (p. 33). Communitarianism obviously values community more highly than liberal, but is sensitive to the liberal claim of individual freedom. Communitarians are not prepared, as liberals are, to accept extensive economic and social disadvantage in a civil society. Pusey (1996) sees this as the essential contrasting feature of the two political and subjective idealisations: between the “communitarian self” and “contractarian/libertarian self” (p. 71), an area that has raised considerable discussion in the past decade (e.g. Baier 1995; Etzioni 1995a; Oakeshott 1993; Taylor 1989, 1995), although admittedly more by philosophers and sociologists than by economists. These rival constructions of the self are based upon two types of self, in a philosophical sense. One is the ethically consequentialist self who is concerned with social outcomes as much as with personal outcomes (Pusey 1996, p. 75). The other is the individualistic self whose ‘freedom to choose’ is the ultimate ground in contractarianism/libertarianism.

The *postmodern* conception of community essentially regards it as socially constructed and fragmentary: as a result, definitions are elusive, even contradictory (Popple 1995, p. 3). Reacting against conceptualisations of community that are founded on “fixed characteristics

² For more on this, see Bell (1993, p. 47) (Note 13). Rawlsian liberalism is described as the “Kantian ideal of the person as rational agent capable of normative self-determination”.

and spaces, objective structures, and universalized ideals such as mutuality, harmony and closeness” (Burkett 2001, p. 237), the postmodern conception sees instead change, subjective constructions and fragmentation. Bauman (1991) stresses that the postmodern condition means that we must adapt to “living at peace with ambivalence” (p. 15). Thus Burkett asserts that community should be seen as a verb rather than a noun to acknowledge the ongoing process of being a community (p. 237) and to limit the fixity of place. Given this, it is not surprising then that certain postmodern theorists consider contemporary communities as “counterfeit ...[and] imitations of fantasies” (Freie 1998), a view supported by the empirical work of Bornat (1997) who concluded that “Constructions of community life necessarily include stories which may have the status of art or fable” (p. 31). For most postmodernists then, community is an illusion or a simulacrum of what once may have been but is no more. However, Brent (2004) takes a more hopeful view in saying that, although illusory, it at least remains an ideal of desired practice worth striving for, and indicative of our social and political life (p. 216).

Specific conceptualisations of community

These philosophical assumptions form the tacit bedrock of multiple conceptions of community. The following six characterisations of community represent the various ways in which community is understood. Such conceptions are either explicit or implicit in the way that community-oriented activity is practised.

Community as loss

Community is often invoked when seeking to ‘regain’ some lost desirable characteristic. Fremeaux (2005) refers to this as “community as a deplorable loss of a certain social organization” (p. 265), a feature of early twentieth century social thinking influenced by Tonnies’ concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Of course, this accompanied the transformation of society from rural to urban accompanying the economic industrialisation. The idealised *Gemeinschaft* “starts from an assumption of a unity of wills as an original or natural condition of found pre-eminently in the nature of the relationship between individuals who are related to one another...[based on] the solidifying psychological and social ties that hold together families and groups” (Christenson 1984, p. 161). The alternative form, *Gesellschaftliche* relationships, “are rationalistic in structure, instrumental in form, individualistic in motivation, and exploitive in consequence... [It is] a construct stimulated by modern industrial production and a money economy” (p. 162). Although not proposing a dualistic conception of community, these extremes provide a useful means of characterising the lived experiences and the discourses of ‘communities’. The ideal *Gemeinschaft* has been frequently represented by those involved in housing, transport, and urban renewal programs as damaged or threatened by ‘rational’ economic and technological processes leading to social deprivation and system dysfunction (Hoggett 1997). ‘Lost’ communities are often

radicalised through grassroots action by those who are disadvantaged, although such action may often be led by other than those directly affected.

Some direct the source of this loss directly to contemporary economic circumstances. Community is lost, these people believe, because of a “perceived loss of civil society” (Waddock 1999, p. 334). This loss results from corporatisation and globalisation, which forces people to work longer hours and to pursue consumerist values, according to some (Barber 1995; Derber 1992; Greider 1998). However, the impact of globalisation on community tends to be played down by postmodernists such as Burkett who says that it “does not mean the end of spatially defined communities and nor does it mean that what predominates is an ‘ideology of globalism’” (Burkett 2001, p. 237).

Community as mutually beneficial

Community can be understood as a form of social organisation producing mutual benefit for its participants. Integral to most theorists who see community as mutually beneficial is the concept of social capital.³ The term, first popularised by Putnam (Putnam 2000, 2001), recognises people’s capacity to draw on a range of economic and cultural resources through participation and social networks. In concrete terms, this means cooperation; involvement; social integration; participation of all ranks; community capacity to identify needs, define problems, and execute courses of action; as well as the capacity to acknowledge community resources and, where necessary, draw on outside resources (Campfens 1996). If social capital is to be truly democratic and sustainable, then processes must empower marginalised people and communities by enhancing the ‘essential tools’ to critically analyse their situation.

Social capital means “networks of social relations characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity”, and as a resource to action (Stone and Hughes 2000). Similarly, Falk and Harrison (2000) define social capital as “the networks, norms and trust which constitute the resources required for individuals, workplaces, groups, organisations and communities to strive for sustainable futures in a changing socio-economic environment”. Clearly implicit in the concept of social capital are values of trust and reciprocity maintaining a cohesive community. In fact, reciprocity is a vital element of the mutually beneficial community (Dixon et al. 2005, p. 5). Reciprocity is also a vital element of community-based deliberative democratic procedures. Social networks in communities are not sufficient to sustain the social relations necessary to maintain community, according to Friedland (2001), who sees trust and reciprocity as vital elements of solidarity’ (p. 366). Gutmann and Thompson see reciprocity as vital to the practice of democratic politics in dealing with conflicts about fundamental values. This central notion of deliberative democracy, reciprocity, means to act fairly; display mutual respect toward opponents; and demand mutually acceptable resolutions of disagreements using arguments that are “consistent with reliable methods of inquiry”.

³ For a fuller elaboration of social capital see Woolcock (1998).

Community as values

This traditional view “represents community as a place of warmth, intimacy and social cohesion” (Popple cited in Burkett 2001, p. 236). Underlying this are humane principles of cooperation and selflessness. For example, Putnam’s concept of social capital is inherently positively value-laden (Fremaux 2005, p. 269) given that social networks enhance “the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them”. Sociologist, Amitai Etzioni (1995b), also sees social networks as crucial to the dissemination and maintenance of values. He portrays communities as:

“social webs of people who know one another as persons and have a moral voice,” members use these bonds to “encourage members to abide by shared values ... [and] gently chastise those who violate shared moral norms and express approbation for those who abide by them” (cited in Fremaux 2005, p. 269).

However, such normativity is not always quite so explicit as ‘community values’ are often implied (Waddock 1999).

Community as democratic

Community is understood as necessary for democracy. For example Friedland (2001) asserts that a strong version of democracy is deliberative and participatory (p. 359). This means that citizens must have the opportunity to deliberate in public “to discuss and formulate issues and ideas that are important to them”; deliberations must have the possibility of forming public agendas; and that citizens should have the opportunity to participate in and formulate their solutions (p. 359). Whether and how communities are communicatively integrated depends on “communication ecologies” (p. 360).

Community as place and identity

The link between a sense of community and a sense of place is not well established (Clark and Stein 2003), although community is associated with the social and environmental characteristics of place (Clark et al. 2003; Pretty et al. 2003, p. 275). The importance of the social is also asserted by Fried (2000) who states that “community attachment appears rooted in the individual’s involvement in local social relations” (p. 194). Sense of place indicators have been shown, in an Australian rural town study, to be significantly related to sense of community and behavioural commitment measure of place attachment (Pretty et al. 2003, p. 282). Community attachment, say Clark and Stein (2003) is one of three components of a sense of place, along with dependence and identity (p. 869).

The level of community identity, says Puddifoot (2003) is characterised by factors such as contentedness, security and involvement, as well as social factors such as perceived engagement of others in community life and the degree of neighbourliness. Clark and Stein

(2003) found that residents identify with different aspects of their community, but were unable to support or refute length of residence with a resident's orientation (p. 875). Puddifoot's (2003) study of inhabitants in a well defined and historically significant English city, showed that there are six shared and personal dimensions to sense of community identity. They are sense of personal support from the community, sense of personal contentedness and security in the community, sense of active personal involvement in the community, perceived engagement of other community members in the community life, perceived neighbourliness and perception of settledness in the community.

However, the study on a sense of place in rural Australian towns by Pretty et al. (2003) found that adults and adolescents have different perceptions of place and that the sense of community was significantly related to behavioural commitment to the place. Like Bonaiuto et al. (1999), age of residents was also related to sense of community and place.

Thus we can conclude that a sense of community is measurable. It comprises place dependence, identity and attachment. When place is considered as community, it is clear that this place identity is shaped by community support, contentedness and security, a feeling of active personal involvement in the community by oneself and others, perceived neighbourliness and settledness.

Community as divisive

In contrast to these positive representations of community, some theorists assert that communities produce negative effects. Far from being cohesive and mutually supportive, communities thrive on enmity, are divisive and disunited, according to Brent (2004). While acknowledging that "community activities are messy and conflictual", Brent argues that they can make useful offensive claims on the wider world (p. 216). Communities whether considered as assemblages built around place or activity will inevitably involve unequal relationships. Thus, structural features of age, sex(uality), ethnicity, religion and geography, which are correlated with inequality in various ways, will inevitably produce frictions, exclusions, and conflict.

Another heterogeneic view of community, however, suggests more positive outcomes. While homogeneity is implicit in traditional conceptions of community, the paradox — the strength of weak ties — asserted by Granovetter (1973) is that "individuals operate better in a complex society if they have access to networks that incorporate people with different backgrounds and experiences from oneself and which require limited commitment to the group" (Flora 1998, p. 491).

Defining community

Community, then, remains an elusive phenomenon to define. Nonetheless, an attempt must be made. Brent (2004), acknowledging its “powerful insubstantiality”, provides three elements: trace, “impossible presence” and supplement (p. 220). Trace, a Derridean concept, is a “past that has never been present”, thereby allowing a meaning. Thus, unable to achieve a presence, it needs to supplement, thereby allowing the continual possibility of being something that is understood. Lacking tangible substance, “it possesses a gravitational pull, a magnetic existence that creates real effects — at tis best, social relationships of mutual care and responsibility” (p. 221). Teleologically, community can be seen as “the continually reproduced desire to overcome the adversity of social life” (p. 221).

While such a definition is useful and understandable within a postmodern theoretical framework, it is not useful enough, I would argue for practitioners who need to work with ‘community’. While acknowledging the poly-vocal social construction of community, such practitioners still need a definition of community that assumes tangibility in order to interact with it physically and communicatively.

A tangible community, then, can be described in the following way:

1. Communities may share a common geographical space, but quite often do not.
2. Groups of people become communities when they identify with a common set of characteristics or cause, even though there may be considerable elements of diversity such as age, sex, geography, social roles and the like.
3. These elements of diversity provide the continual grounds for the fragmentation of community.
4. People who speak for communities do so, aware or unaware, that they do not have unanimous support or that they have occluded certain members.
5. While diverse in composition, community members can be considered as such when they identify with a significant defining characteristic of that community membership.
6. The vitality of communities is dependent on the characteristics of open systems (Monge 1977; von Bertalanffy 1968).⁴
7. However, the integrity of communities maintained as originally conceived (i.e. traditional, fundamentalist), depend on the enforcement of foundational principles. Although such

⁴ The most important features of open systems are:

- non-summativity — the system as a whole is greater than the mere sum of its parts
- interdependence — every systemic part affects every other part of the system. Thus a change in one part will result in a change in another part.
- teleological self-regulation — it meets goals by adapting to feedback from the environment
- homeostatic — to avoid entropy (outcome of a closed system) the system regulates and manages its position in the supra-system
- equifinality — systems are adaptable and acknowledges equifinality (meeting a desired end or goal by various routes).

communities face the likelihood of atrophy, their viability depends on continually attracting fervent adherents.

8. Community cannot be enforced, but must emerge from the desire to belong.
9. Community members will remain as community members, despite adversity, so long as they sufficiently believe in its principles of membership or have a significant element of their identity incorporated in community membership.

Political expressions

Traditional notions of community have been incorporated into conservative ideological discourses with backward looking orientations (Morris 1996), even by neo-liberal governments with strongly individualist philosophies, such as the Howard Government. Crucial to this political appropriation of 'community' by political parties is an ideologically charged value system. According to Anthony Giddens in *The Third Way. The Renewal of Social Democracy* (1998 cited in Fremeaux 2005, p. 268), community:

“doesn't simply imply trying to capture lost forms of social solidarity; it refers to practical means of furthering the social and material refurbishment of neighbourhoods, towns and larger local areas.”

We see in this assertion an attempt to regain some valuable characteristic that has been lost where the term 'solidarity' discursively taps into a rich labourist vein of working class ethics. This lexical signifier carries traces of (mostly masculine) class identity and loyalty, stoicism in adversity and egalitarianism that is clearly at odds with the neo-liberal subject within a neo-classical economic structure that the Blair Government had consolidated from the Thatcher-Major era. However, when one looks more closely at the government policies emanating from such communitarian appeals, they are often quite individualist (Fairclough 2000; Hall 1998).

The political discourses of the major political parties in US, UK, and Australia are now dominated by concepts of personal responsibility, reciprocity and community. They are manifested in reduced government services, lower taxes, privatisation, work-for-the-dole and private superannuation. In Australia, the Howard Government justifies work-for-the dole schemes on the basis of mutual obligations (Yeend 2004) arising between unemployed people and the taxpaying public. The government has also attempted to link social capital to solving regional problems largely induced by globalisation and neo-liberalism.

In this new political scenario, the community's social capital replaces the government in providing assistance to those in need. The Third Way links the personal and political in a way that no longer understands citizens as social citizens with varying levels of dependency on the state, which was the case for most of the twentieth century. Citizens are considered at root to be ethical creatures, according to Rose (2000). Although desiring personal autonomy as a right, citizens are less and less considered as national collectivities as 'communities' —

neighbourhoods, associations, networks, lifestyles, etc. (Rose 2000, p. 1398). The new form of ethopolitics that governs such communities is based on “ethical self-regulation of the individual in terms of fixed moral codes, and the self-crafting of one’s existence according to a certain art of living (p. 1399). Given this new conception of the citizen, community “consists of multiple objectifications formed at the unstable and uncomfortable intersections between politics and that which should and must remain beyond its reach” (p. 1401). Drawing on Etzioni, Rose construes community as “an affective and ethical field, binding its elements into durable relations”. Thus, with individualised and internalised ethics, not so much directed by external authorities such as church or state as by personal choices of lifestyle, consumption and subjectivity (Featherstone 1991), “it is possible for subjects to distance themselves from the cohesive strategies of the social state...and access resources of subject formation in order to invent themselves, individually and collectively, as new kinds of political actors” (p. 1402). Appropriated for Third Way politics, then, a community in a civil society “is a veritably bucolic zone of liberty, ‘a place where citizens freely act together to consolidate and express their freedoms, to solve problems, to provide services to each other or to simply enjoy each other’s company” (p. 1405).

Communitarian politics, then, clearly, faces a huge political challenge. Contemporary communitarianism, says Brent (2004), fails to account for the structural forces of globalist capitalism that creates uncertainty, “sweeps away local structures”, valorises individualisation (see also Friedland 2001), and strengthens race, gender, and class divisions (p. 215). Essentially, communitarian-based politics needs to take account of the postmodern subject and acknowledge the vastly changed socio-economic circumstances. Civil society in which communities exist is a “strange multiplicity”, a “complex terrain” of diverse struggles for cultural recognition that often cut across one another and across the territorial boundaries of the nation-state (Wenman 2003, p. 168). These struggles constitute agonistic pluralism comprising necessary interdependence and strife (p. 168). Politics in these circumstances is based on a community that is hegemonically constructed, according to Mouffe, and so is a “community without a definite shape and in continuous re-enactment” (quoted in Wenman 2003, p. 182).

Possibilities

Postmodern theorists such as Burkett do not let the issue of community lapse into the sort of postmodern relativism that negates concerted political action or even structure. Rather, she sees the building of community as “an ongoing act of extraordinary creativity in which one comes face to face with the struggle of human relationship, of engaging with an-Other” (p. 237). Similarly positive is O’Hara (1996) who claims that by seeing community as an ongoing creation the “we co-create reality which in turn creates us,” thereby creating a new kind of community (p. 151).

To survive within the current conditions of globalised neo-liberal capitalist hegemony will require “complex and dynamic” features (Brent 2004). As well, the notion of place will need to be withdrawn from the defining characteristic of community. While it is true that many/most communities form around a geographical location, many do not, or only meet infrequently in a ‘place’. This is so for two reasons. Community built primarily on place can be restrictive and exclusionary, to the point of xenophobia and supremacism (e.g. the World War II Axis allies of Japan and Germany).

Like Friedland (2001), I am dubious whether the concept of community is sufficiently useful in a post-industrial society as it can be marshalled and appropriated in various polysemic forms to suit various political objectives that advantage one sector of society over another. However, I share his belief that we need to sustain and nurture a particular democratic and egalitarian form of community not just for participatory democracy to function, but to enhance our humanity. Although rejecting Habermas’s idealised notion of communicative action (Habermas 1984, 1987, 1989), it is true that “all communities lie...at the seam of system and lifeworld”. By testing our notions of community and the boundary that it shares with corporations, we may come to a richer understanding of whether capitalist organisations can contribute to healthy communities.

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