'Community': Past, Present, and Future

Majid Yar

> '"Community" is one of those words…bandied around in ordinary, everyday speech, apparently readily intelligible to speaker and listener, which… however, causes immense difficulty'
> (Cohen, 1985: 11)

'Community' is a term used, with considerable regularity, across a vast range of social settings. It is a commonplace of everyday speech, and features prominently also in professional and political discourse. We might note familiar terms such as 'community care', 'community relations', 'community policing', 'community punishment', 'community regeneration', to mention but a few. However, as Cohen suggests, the near-ubiquity of the term is matched by the vagueness and variability of meaning that attends its use. It may be that users are not particularly clear about what exactly they mean by the term, or it may be used and understood in widely divergent ways by different actors and audiences. This combination of frequency and indeterminacy also marks the mobilisation of the term in social science discourse. 'Community' is one of the oldest concepts in the sociological book, and one of its most challenging and contentious. It has even been suggested that, since the term seems to mean everything and anything, it is less than academically useful and should be mercifully retired from the lexicon. Yet, despite the best efforts of the sceptics, 'community' as a piece of social scientific terminology, shows few signs of having been pushed into decline, let alone of having been mortally wounded. Indeed, the past few decades have seen a revived interest in 'community' across a range of social science disciplines, such as sociology, social policy, criminology, economics, law and politics. We may suggest (at least) two possible reasons for its resilience. Firstly, it may be that the term (in whichever variation or guise it appears) refers to something fairly fundamental to the subject matter of the social sciences - namely, the question of 'the social' itself, the nature and experience of social bonds, ties and connections that integrate us as individuals into wider social structures and relationships. In other words, it may be that despite the problems it causes, the concept of community is difficult for the social sciences to do without, in some form or another. A second factor that may account for the longevity of the concept is the importance of *social change*. Recent social science has been preoccupied with the idea that society is in the midst of radical transformation. This concern with social change is indexed by a range of terms that will be familiar to most all students in social science disciplines - terms such as 'globalisation', 'individualisation', 'detraditionalisation', 'de-industrialisation', 'post-modernisation', 'McDonaldisation', 'reflexivity', 'information society', 'network society', and so on. If we are in the grip of such potent processes that are transforming the social landscape (for better or worse), then this inevitably will entail profound changes for the types of bonds, inter-personal relations and connections through which we interact with others (Crow, 2002). In other words, while older forms of community might decline under the force of sweeping social changes, it is equally likely that these changes will bring new forms of community into prominence. If either of the above suggestions has any validity (and I believe they do), then the question of 'community' will be assured an important place in the social sciences as we enter the 21st century.

The term 'community' has been used to address a remarkably wide range of social phenomena, and this variety is reflected in the range of topics covered by the contributions to this issue. The substantive issues and debates under discussion include: the emergence of 'virtual' communities in 'cyberspace' (Evans); the relationship between community and crime (Jamieson); the experience of community amongst globally mobile populations, such as economic migrants (Miller); the renewed importance of community in political discourse (Calder); and the place of the natural environment in the formation of community attachments (Szerszynski). However, despite this range, what unites the contributions to this volume is a conviction that community matters, and that it remains a valuable concept for grasping shifting forms of human relationships in a period of significant social, political, economic, cultural and technological change. Taken together, the contributions aim to illuminate important dimensions of how we experience and conceive community at the present moment, and to explore (however tentatively) the possible 'futures of community' in the new century.

Community and Modern Life: Narratives of Decline and Crisis

While the social sciences have been fascinated with the question of community from their inception, their dominant narrative has been that of community's supposed decline or disappearance. One of the most long-lived and compelling debates in social science has focussed on the notion that intensive community life was dominant in the pre-industrial world, a world of small-scale, rural, agrarian settlements. In such a world, people were closely inter-connected through a range of localised relationships of social and economic inter-dependence, bolstered by the importance of extended kinship structures and family alliances. Moreover, people supposedly shared common and tradition-bound outlooks, such as those of morality and religion. The development of modern industrialised society, however, sent these traditional community forms into decline. Modern life, it is claimed, was characterised not by small-scale local existence, but by large-scale urban agglomerations, in which life became increasingly anonymous. Under the impact of social and cultural change, people became increasingly individualised, and so less connected to a wider sphere of intimate social relations. The decline of religion (a process of 'secularisation') undermined the common belief-systems and moral guidelines that had previously tied people together. Hence, community was viewed very much as a phenomenon of the past, something sent into terminal decline by the processes of revolutionary social, political, economic and cultural change that swept the west in the course of the 19th century. This narrative will be familiar to most students of sociology, a discipline whose 'founding fathers' were in considerable part preoccupied with this supposed process of community decline. The modern 'loss of community' was enshrined in Ferdnand Tönnies (1957) celebrated distinction between pre-modern *Gemeinshaft* (community) and modern *Gesellschaft* (society), and in Emile Durkheim's (1964) famous distinction between 'mechanical' and 'organic' solidarity. In a different, but not unconnected manner, Max Weber explored the emergence of a 'disenchanted' modern world in which older forms of authority and moral direction increasingly gave way to a more rationalised and individualistic existence (Weber, 1930). These enquiries into the fate of collective social forms played an integral role in defining some of the key debates of sociological inquiry as a whole - captured, for example, in the theoretical and conceptual 'dualisms' between 'individual' and 'society', 'structure' and 'agency', and 'freedom' and 'constraint'.

Subsequent generations of scholars have devoted considerable time and attention attempting to variously prove or disprove the narratives of community decline bequeathed them by an earlier generation of 'sociological greats'. For example, the notion that modern, urban existence disaggregates community bonds played a central role in the groundbreaking sociological work of the so-called 'Chicago School' in the early decades of the 20th century. In the immediate post-war decades, others followed up this cue by proclaiming that sweeping social processes (such as industrialisation, urbanisation and bureaucratisation) had effectively brought about 'the eclipse of community' (Stein, 1964). Others, however, were more sceptical, claiming that even in the mass, urban, industrialised setting of the inner city, forms of close community ties and inter-dependence had actually survived (Young and Wilmott, 1957; Gans, 1962). This debate was replayed in a new form a few decades later, as a further wave of socio-economic and political-ideological change was discerned, identified under labels such as 'neo-liberalism' and 'possessive individualism'. It was suggested that whatever communal bonds had heretofore persisted were being effectively swept away by an increasingly competitive, individualistic and self-oriented ethos (an ethos encapsulated in Thatcher's infamous dictum that 'there is no such thing as society'). It has thus been claimed that the institutions that once integrated individuals in a 'mass society' (such as the welfare state, trades unions, and such like) have fragmented or been denuded, leaving individuals much more isolated than ever before (Young, 1999; Bauman, 2000). However, such visions of an atomised social existence, one bereft of wider communal bonds and ties, has not gone unchallenged. Recent studies claim to have found that, even amidst radical change, community remains an important part of people's cultural identities and aspirations (Sherlock 2002). Indeed, it may be suggested that it is precisely *because* people are experiencing unsettling processes of 'disembedding', that they discover a renewed need and yearning for forming community ties.

The debate about community, and its loss or decline, is not simply a matter of disinterested scientific inquiry, a case of discovering 'the facts of the case'. Rather, from the very beginning, it has been a

profoundly *normative* issue. Many writers on the theme have tended to view community as a 'good thing' - good for individuals, and good for society. Hence they have been just as interested in what they think *ought* to be the case (believing that we *should* have a strong and vibrant community life), and have seen the decline of community as posing serious moral, social and political problems. Thus Tönnies, for example, approached the question from a socially and politically conservative position, and tended to idealise traditional community life as an indispensable source of moral authority and social order. Conversely, he saw its breakdown as the source of many and diverse social ills. Durkheim also viewed the breakdown of traditional 'organic solidarity' with considerable disquiet, claiming that its loss was responsible for a rising tide of 'anomie' (normlessness) that brought crime, despair and even suicide in its wake (Durkheim, 1970). However, unlike Tönnies, he believed that a return to traditional community life was neither possible nor desirable. It was not possible as it was no longer appropriate as a source of social solidarity in an industrialised, differentiated, secularised and individualistic society. It was not desirable, because the enforcement of authoritarian norms and codes of conduct was incompatible with modern liberal ideals of individual freedom and choice. He was, however, ultimately optimistic, believing that the crisis induced by community decline was a temporary difficulty only. He believed that a new form of social solidarity would emerge to replace the old, albeit one radically different from the old notion of a tradition-bound, intimate and closed collective life. In other words, Durkheim's was a quintessentially 'modernist' faith that the new society would find the means to steady itself, to anchor social relations in a way that would ultimately overcome conflict and disorder.

Durkheim's belief that the loss of traditional community forms could be overcome, and that individuality and solidarity could be reconciled, has not fared well in succeeding social scientific thought. Rather, over the course of the 20th century, there emerged a strong belief that we had lost something important, and that community breakdown was the source of many social problems. Thus, as early as the 1920s, the Chicago School sociologists blamed community incoherence (what the called 'social disorganisation') for a rise in crime and delinquency amongst the inner city's working classes. This association became a recurrent feature of much sociological work. Most recently, it has emerged with renewed vigour under the guise of what is commonly termed 'communitarianism'. Communitarian thinkers have made concerted claims that the decline of community is the source of social disorder, incivility, and alienation (Braithwaite, 1989; Etzioni, 1995; Putnam, 2000). Nowhere has this been more marked than in the discussion of rising crime rates in post-war western societies. **Janet Jamieson's** contribution to this volume tackles precisely this issue, critically assessing the range of claims made about the inter-relation between crime and community. She provides a chronological overview of how these discourses have emerged and changed over the course of the 20th century. In particular, she suggests that earlier discourses (and their associated socio-economic policies) were concerned with *rehabilitating* and *reintegrating* offenders into community relations. However, the faith in our ability to create a crime-free and harmonious society through public policy interventions have suffered at the hands of escalating crime rates, a perceived escalation of incivility and social disorder, and new political agendas and ideologies that advocate the withdrawal of state involvement from expensive social policy programmes. Instead, Jamieson suggests, more recent discourses on crime and community have taken a punitive turn, one that is focussed upon protecting the community by systematically *excluding* and *marginalizing* those viewed as the actual or potential sources of offending behaviour. Hence, in the area of crime and crime control, the community discourse has shifted significantly from one of 'inclusion' to 'exclusion' (Young, 1999).

Whether or not we are persuaded by attempts to locate the source of social ills in the decline of traditional communities, it is not something that can be ignored. This is most especially so because its influence has reached far beyond the halls of academia and come to inspire a number of political movements and major political parties. Perhaps the most notable instance is the development of Tony Blair's 'New Labour' project in the UK. Blair readily acknowledges the communitarian 'guru' Amatai Etzioni as a major influence, and New Labour's political programmes and policy proposals closely follow the communitarian line that links social problems with a lack of community in contemporary society. The ways in which community has become a central rhetorical and ideological support for New Labour's political vision is the theme of **Gideon Calder's** contribution. He begins by sketching, at a general level, the kinds of ideas and claims associated with 'communitarianism'; he then goes on to consider in what ways and to what extent New Labour's 'Third Way' politics might be said to put communitarian thinking into practice. He also considers the extent to which new Labour's self-alignment with communitarianism might make its politics and policies vulnerable to the frequent criticisms levelled at communitarian ideas. Chief amongst these is the suggestion that the insistence

upon a society bound together shared values and traditions implies a significant degree of intolerance towards 'difference'. Calder suggests that New Labour's policies in fact do display significant 'authoritarian' tendencies, tendencies not entirely dissimilar from the 'moral authoritarianism' of the Thatcherite Conservatism that preceded New Labour's rise to power.

Alternate Narratives of Community: Change and Transformation

It was noted above that while some have pronounced the disappearance of close-knit and localised communities, others have suggested that such spatially bounded forms persist and continue to play an important role in structuring social relations. However, there have emerged recently other avenues of inquiry exploring the possibility of new community forms that no longer conform to the clear equation of community with territorial closure. Such accounts look beyond tightly circumscribed localities as the basis of communal bonds, and suggest that processes of radical social change are bringing into existence new types of community that are at least partially 'disembedded' from place. This debate has been focussed upon claims about the effects of 'globalisation', by which we can understand a process in which social relations become increasingly 'stretched out' over space, and so no longer strictly confined to particular places (Robertson, 1992) Under such circumstances, the mapping of social groups onto particular places begins to blur, and the relationships and interactions between group members become much more dispersed. A prime contributor to this 'deterritorialisation' is the increase of *mobility*, the movement and flow of people within and across nations and borders (Boden and Friedland, 1994; Urry, 2000). Rather than simply dissolving all forms of social bonds it has been suggested that community re-emerges as a more fluid set of network relations, encompassing people who are both 'here' and 'there', and who move in and out of particular spaces/places, retaining old connections and forging new ones as they go (Eade,1995).

One exemplar of the older, spatially- and culturally-closed model of community is that of the 'ethnic enclave'. In many cities across the world we find clearly defined districts that go under labels such as 'Chinatown', 'Little Italy', and 'Little India'. Such communities have traditionally comprised stable social clusters of migrant populations, characterised by intensive patterns of interaction and inter-dependence, and an equally clearly demarcated cultural differentiation from the wider 'host' society. However, in his contribution **Vincent Miller** suggests that globalisation is reconfiguring such communities into new and more fluid forms. Through his detailed examination of Chinese 'ethnoburbs' in North America, he suggests that the newly emerging ethnic communities are significantly different from the older enclaves. Rather than stable, fixed and bounded, he argues that these new forms can be seen as 'spaces of flows', characterised by a constant movement and circulation of people, and a much more 'hybrid' and 'cosmopolitan' cultural configuration that intermixes 'Eastern' and 'Western' lifestyles, values, and habits. The communal ties and bonds of 'ethnoburbans' simultaneously encompass the fellow Chinese migrants in their proximity, members of the wider 'host' community, and those in their country of origin with whom they retain extensive connections through frequent travel and communication. The subjects of Miller's study thus manage to form the social bonds and ties associated with community life, but in a manner no longer restricted to or defined by fixed spatial or cultural coordinates. It may well be that such dispersed, hybrid and motile collectives furnish an 'ideal type' for the kinds of communities we might expect to see increasingly as processes of global transformation continue apace.

If we take processes of global 'deterritorialisation' and 'disembedding' to their logical conclusion, we might envisage the emergence of communities that are completely divorced from any spatial location or face-to-face interaction, and which exist only in mediated forms of technological communication (Castells, 1996). Over the last decade, we have seen a rising interest in the notion of 'virtual communities', communities that exist solely in the 'electronic space' of the Internet. In such 'cyber communities', relations and interactions take place between people who 'meet' only through 'chatrooms', 'newsgroups', 'bulletin boards' and the like (Rheingold, 1995; Bromberg, 1996). This new and exciting area of community studies in the subject of **Karen Evans**' contribution. She notes that, in contrast to traditional communities (into which people are born by accident of birthplace, residence, ethnic background and the like), membership of virtual communities is seen a matter of choice, with individuals 'opting-in' on the basis of shared interests, enthusiasms, and outlooks. Moreover, it is claimed that being 'virtually present' gives individuals an unprecedented freedom to reinvent themselves, and so escape the prejudices and expectations that are imposed upon people in the 'real

world' according to their gender, race, sexual orientation, class background, or appearance. Amongst their most ardent advocates, virtual communities are invested with a utopian gloss, viewed as a 'brave new world' of freedom and equality in which people can at last be free from the constraints and coercions of 'the real'. Evans subjects such claims to a careful and balanced evaluation, mapping out not only what's 'new' or potentially revolutionary about such communities, but also highlighting the ways in which patterns of identity and relations of power from the non-virtual world continue to make themselves present in cyberspace.

Virtual communities are also one instance of a wider burgeoning interest in how new forms of community might be formed from the voluntary choices of their members. Such communities have been dubbed 'communities of assent', in contrast to older 'communities of descent' into which people were thrust by birth and background (Morris, 1996). Such associational communities have flourished in recent times, a notable instance being the growth of 'new social movements' in which people with shared social experiences, cultural values and political aspirations have come together in order to explore and forward their chosen way of life (Melucci, 1989). With the growing interest in environmental issues in particular, we have seen the development of 'ecological movements' in which communities take shape around a shared delight in, and reverence for, the natural world. This phenomenon is the starting point for **Bronislaw Szerszynski's** contribution. Innovatively, however, Szerszkynski takes his cue not so much from current developments in social theory, as from an older tradition of sociological and anthropological analysis. Anthropologists in particular have long been attuned to the key role played by nature in the formation of human communities. Through a shared attachment to some natural object or entity (a feature of the landscape such as a forest, or a 'totemic' animal, to give but two examples) individuals are brought together into a community that shares aesthetic, moral and/or practical orientations (Durkheim, 1954; Lévi-Strauss, 1969; Douglas, 1970). Szerszynski discerns just such a 'sacralisation' (making-sacred) of the natural world as the basis of a range of new associational communities - ranging from outdoor activity enthusiasts such as hikers, through 'healthy living' subcultures, to environmental activists and pressure groups. In a world in which the decline of older traditions frees people to form new interests and orientations, and in which a threatened nature in particular intrudes ever more urgently upon the conscience, such 'communities of nature' promise to come increasingly to the fore.

Conclusion: Looking Back, Looking Forward

Given the longevity of debates around community, and the very broad range of issues they raise and explore, this introduction has of necessity furnished only a brief sketch of the terrain. I have aimed to capture something of the flavour of these debates; to highlight what I see as some of the most notable lines of thought and of dispute; and to remark upon just some of the recent social transformations that are impacting upon our experience of community life. As with any exploration that takes present trends as the basis of making predictions about what may be to come, reflecting upon the 'futures of community' is necessarily a tentative business (when the future arrives, it is almost invariably *not* quite how we had imagined it would be!). The best we can do is to look as clearly and carefully as possible at recent changes and current developments, and to use these as a basis for imagining what the 'futures of community' might entail. The highest compliment I can give my fellow contributors is that their papers all raise and explore topics of great importance and relevance, and do so in a manner that combines scholarly rigour with clarity of expression and purpose. Those interested enough to read on past this introduction, and to engage with the contributions that follow, should find much therein to stimulate, inform and provoke.

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About The author

Majid Yar is Lecturer in Criminology in the Department of Applied Social Science at Lancaster University, UK. He has previously taught and researched in the Department of Sociology, the Centre for Philosophy, and the Centre for the Study of Environmental Change, all at Lancaster. He is the author of over a dozen articles, spanning a wide range of issues including: the philosophy of community, political theory, the history of social and political thought, criminological theory, surveillance studies, popular culture, and the philosophy of social science. His current work is focussed on two main areas: the inter-relation between criminology and theories of social change, and the construction of 'criminological imaginaries' in popular cinematic representation.