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Title	'Restoration' of urban community: challenges and prospects
Author(s)	森下, 義亜
Citation	研究論集, 10, 253-266
Issue Date	2010-12-24
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/44609
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	MORISITA.pdf



‘Restoration’ of urban community: challenges and prospects

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Summary

This paper aims to consider the sociological term of ‘community’. It theoretically thinks about its state in contemporary urban settings. It has long been agreed that sociology is a discipline that studies human interrelations and societal solidarity. Thus, it is reasonable as well as meaningful to consider community as the context in which they can take place. However, the concept in question has been interpreted in a number of ways, thereby rendering it a confusing omnibus word with a variety of connotations. This has been the case, even though it is one of the key terms of sociology and thus needs to be clarified for sociological discussions. This paper argues that *community is space for continuous social processes which mould the way that human interrelations and societal solidarity materialise with varying significance*. This definition means that community is not something that is static, territorially embedded or refers to a group or a place; rather, it is something that embraces these all as social space which has no boundaries as long as there are social interactions.

Based upon this definition, this paper will reflect on the nature of community by tracing the path which it has been through to become what it is today, i.e., community in urban settings. As it is social space, community can be found where human beings are. Therefore, there are such words as rural community, urban community, cyber community, to name but a few. This paper will focus on urban community, clarifying the rationale for analysing community in contemporary urban context. It will then point out some of the major challenges facing urban community today. It will also highlight the importance of our endeavour to create community, according to the

social organisation of the time.

1. Introduction: the contents of the paper

The present paper is intended for the provision of the author's interim understanding of the term 'community' in the sociological context and its state in contemporary urban settings. As sociology is a discipline that studies human interrelations and societal solidarity, there is a good reason for considering community as the context where they can take place. However, the concept of community has been understood in many different ways, rendering it a confusing omnibus word which has a variety of connotations. This has long been the case, even though it is one of the key terms of sociology and thus needs to be clarified for sociological discussions with substance. This paper argues that *community is space for continuous social processes which mould the way that human interrelations and societal solidarity materialise with varying significance*. This original definition means that community is not something that is static, territorially embedded or refers to a group or a place; rather, it is something that embraces these all as social space which has no boundaries.

Based upon the definition, this paper shall consider the nature of community by tracing the path which it has been through to become what it is today, i.e. community in the urban context. As social space, community can be found where human beings are. Therefore, there are such words as rural community, urban community, cyber community, to name but only a few of the examples. This paper will focus on urban community. After providing the rationale for analysing community in contemporary urban context, it will point out some of the major challenges facing our contemporary community. It will then indicate that it is highly unlikely that there can be perfect community at any time. The paper attempts to point this fact out throughout the discussions which it provides. Community evolves. What is imperative now, or any time, is that we reflect upon and create community as social space, according to and utilising the characteristics of community of the time. Finally the paper indicates a direction in which the future of community can proceed.

2. Problem statement: the vagueness of the term 'community'

2.1 The *raison d'être* of sociology: key concepts

It has long been agreed that sociology is one of the sciences of society (Tominaga, 1995). Ever since it was inspired by Auguste Comte in the nineteenth century, this area of study has been dealing with issues around solidarity in society. Comte himself was deeply disturbed by the anarchy which pervaded France after the French Revolution in 1789 and drew up plans for the reestablishment of solidarity (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004). Solidarity has remained prime importance to and the focus of the discipline of sociology and the branches of it. Within the scope of sociology in general, therefore, are a number of key concepts which are closely or inextricably related to solidarity within society, and this fact underlines the *raison d'être* of sociology. Some of the examples of such concepts include, *inter alia*, interaction, co-operation, a sense of belonging, and emotional attachment (Kaneko, 2007). All these concepts invite and deserve attention and scrutiny in its own right but are all integral parts of societal solidarity.

Human beings, by nature, possess a sense of belonging that needs to be satisfied in one way or another. We are all social creatures who innately, intentionally, or as is often the case, unconsciously (seek to) relate to others so as to lead social life, which differentiates human beings from other living creatures. Anthony Giddens, in the beginning of his comprehensive introductory book on sociology, provides a typical example of human interrelations, referring to a cup of coffee. He points out that a cup of coffee consumed by someone illustrates the profoundness of human history and complex interrelations; even such an apparently uninteresting piece of behaviour as sipping coffee is a reflection of human interrelations from the past through the present (Giddens, 2006). That is, where there are human beings, there will be interrelations both between and amongst them, and it is the foundation stone of human society and solidarity within it.

Attempting to use the sociological imagination whereby sociologists put things in a wider context (Mills, 1970), the following section will sociologically rethink the term 'community', which, this paper argues, is space for human interrelations and societal solidarity, as explained below. The author of the present paper agrees with Robert Nisbet that "the referent of the 'social' [is] almost invariably the communal" (Nisbet, 1967, p. 56).

2.2 Rethinking the term ‘community’: an unsolved question?

Realising the fact that sociology considers solidarity through human interrelations as having been the essence of human society in turn leads us to wonder about the context in which these take place; neither of these should be regarded as a phenomenon which materialises in isolation from the societal context. What is the context called? The answer which this paper advances is ‘community’. A second reasonable question would be about the definition of the term; what is this seemingly straightforward word supposed to mean? Although the term community is used in many different situations, be it in our ordinary daily life (e.g. neighbourhood community, town community among others) or otherwise, it is still challenging to clarify the definition, and as introduced below, it is even more so sociologically.

According to a classic definition of community put forward by Robert M. MacIver, it certainly is legitimate to argue that no matter what form it takes—e.g. rural, urban or cyber—, it can be called community. This is because the term community can refer to “any area of common life, village, or town, or district, or country, or even wider area” (MacIver, 1917, p. 22). However, it is also true that “the sociological content of community has remained a matter for endless dispute... there is no clear and widely accepted definition of just what characteristic features of social interaction constitute the solidaristic relations typical of so-called communities” (Scott & Marshall, 2005, p. 94).

As has just been seen above, the question as to what community actually refers to has been left unsolved for almost a century. The term is vague, disputed and puzzling, even though/because it is interpreted and used in many different ways not only in sociology but also in more general ways than that. In other words, community can be understood as “a plastic word” which does not have corresponding denotations (The Lumpen Society, 1997, p. 38) or as “an omnibus word embracing a motley assortment of concepts and qualitatively different phenomena” (Dixon, 1999, p. 288). This implies the difficulty involved in defining the term community. However, if the objective is to provide meaningful discussions about society, then it is important to bear in mind that “a general science of society is vain if we have no answer, or a mistaken one...” (MacIver, *op. cit.*, p. 3).

In an attempt to better comprehend the concept of community, the following section shall propose an attempted definition of the term community in the sociological context. It does not intend to be an unquestionable definition of it, although the discussions to follow will be premised upon the definition. The section will then investigate the nature

and provide an overview of the socially evolutionary process which community has been through. Following this, it will critically discuss the current state of community specifically within contemporary urban context.

3. Discussion: 'restoration' of urban community and its challenges and prospects

3.1 An attempted definition of community: the basis for the discussions

With a view to providing a premise upon which the following discussions can be effectively presented, this section first puts forward a definition of community in sociological terms—*community is space for continuous social processes which mould the way that human interrelations and societal solidarity materialise with varying significance.*

The understanding given above is not in line with many conventional interpretations of community, in the sense that it does not necessarily associate community with geographically circumscribed areas. As a matter of fact, it employs the uncountable word 'space' which denotes all of the areas in which everything exists, and in which everything has a position or direction. Therefore, it should be fair to argue that *when used in the present context the word space also connotes human interrelations and societal solidarity that can materialise, irrespective of territorial limits.*

To put it more specifically, in some of other general ways, the term community is defined as territorial. Definitions of this sort have singular and countable words, such as 'a group', 'a particular area', 'a place' and so forth, contained in them. For instance, an example definition from a dictionary for general use (Oxford Advanced Learner's Electronic Dictionary) describes community as "all the people who live in a particular area, country, etc. when talked about as a group". Similar descriptions can be found even in sociology, and the term community tends to be defined as having territorial limits. By these conceptualisations, community, as its origin in Latin implies, seems to exist with the walls around it. For example, Richard T. Shaefer and Robert P. Lamm perceive community as "a spatial or political unit of social organisation" (Shaefer & Lamm, 1999, p. 415). In the age of globalisation, however, it is of critical importance not to conceive the idea of community as being static and geographically embedded (Campbell, 2000).

The two example definitions given above, therefore, do not suffice to explain the key characteristics of community, such as its dynamic nature as a basis for social processes of the time as well as *aterritoriality* which have clearly been at play. As the section which

follows investigates, community as we understand has evolved in virtue of these characteristics, which tend to be overlooked by those inadequate interpretations and definitions of community as a sociological term.

Thus far, we have considered community in relation to human interrelations and societal solidarity and attempted to define the term community. It cannot be too underlined here that *although groups, units, places, areas amongst others can contribute towards human interrelations and societal solidarity in question, none of these is to be regarded as community per se precisely because they are contents/products of community; community essentially is dynamic space or the context for continuous social processes which in turn mould human interrelations and societal solidarity*. The present paper contends that community is always in existence where human beings are and that it is the characteristics of its contents which will vary in accordance with social processes of the time. In fact, as will be discussed below, community has been through its evolutionary process—i.e. a process in the sense of gradual development over a period of time—, experiencing a series of social changes and processes which have taken place throughout.

3.2 Community in the evolutionary process: the ‘emergence’ of urban community

The focus of this paper is placed upon community of the present, challenges it faces and its future prospects; it is concerned with the present and future of community. What community is it that this paper shall consider: is it that in rural, cyber, or other settings? The answer is that it is community in urban settings. It shall consider such community as space for continuous social relations which mould the way that human interrelations and solidarity materialise with varying significance.

Another question may well arise. Why urban community? The rationale behind this is the fact that the majority of us, including those in the Asia Pacific region, live in urban areas of the world. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, around half of the world’s population live in urban areas today. Moreover, the world’s urban population is projected to increase to 4.9 billion people by 2030, about 60% of the world’s population (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2005).

Albeit to varying degrees, people living in urban areas today lead more than ever before a way of life called urbanism which was coined by Louis Wirth (Wirth, 1936). “Urbanism refers to patterns of social life thought typical of urban populations. These include

a highly specialised division of labour, growth of instrumentalism in social relationships, weakening of kin relationships, growth of voluntary associations, normative pluralism, secularisation, increase in social conflict, and growth in importance of the mass media" (Scott & Marchall, *op. cit.*, p. 681).

Against this background, it is important as well as meaningful to reflect upon community in urban areas as space for human interrelations and solidarity in the years to come (Chekki, 2000); this reflection can have significant implications for our sociological discussions about the present and future of community. Due to limited space, however, this paper only looks at community typically seen in the developed countries which are predominantly urbanised.

As has been presented above, this paper considers that the state of community does not remain a static form of any kind because it evolves depending upon continuous social processes of the time; it has only but always played the role of space/the social context of the time. Hence, in order to analyse the current state of community in the urban context, we need to comprehend how community has evolved into the urban community of the present time which we actually experience, using the sociological imagination.

"The modern idea of community has its origins in the Greek political community, the polis", which "provided the basic ideal for all subsequent conceptions of community" (Delanty, 2003, p. 12). Thus it is worth going back in time to briefly trace the dynamic process which community has been through, referring to two important social changes. As Aristotle noted, the fundamental departure point for the discussions on the evolution of community is the fact that community originally embraced relations in three different aspects of life, namely the social, the economic and the political. These relations together constituted community which essentially meant society and vice versa. Above community did the state exist, and between them there was a tension because the former was a manifestation of lives which people directly lived and experienced, whilst the latter was potentially coercive as well as was "an objective and distant entity" (*ibid.*, p. 8).

This relationship between community and the state remained more or less intact up until the seventeenth century when modern state formation began in Europe. This ultimately had a profound impact upon community's future direction. There are two dimensions of this which are worthwhile mentioning here. One of them is the industrial revolution that first occurred in Britain in the eighteenth century. This brought about a transformation of the hitherto predominant mode of production and social life in rural settings into modern and mechanised economic activities and social organisation in

urban settings. The other is the establishment of imperial states. The state which had existed far from people of community was firmly consolidated for the sake of national interest, by and whereby mobilising the very people as organised and loyal members of it (Yamanouchi, 2006; Bernstein, 2000; Harriss, 2000). This series of fundamental social changes has often been referred to as the great transformation (Polanyi, 1944).

Urbanisation and urbanism were simultaneously accompanied and boosted by modernisation (Dixon, *op. cit.*), and inevitably impacted upon community as space for continuous social relations which mould the way that human interrelations and solidarity materialise with varying significance. *Community was found not in rural but in urban settings much more than it had previously been, the political became associated with the economic, and the economic through the political or the political through the economic was increasingly 'submerged in social relationships' (ibid., p. 46), thereby reducing the social to "the residual" (Delanty, op. cit., p. 29) of community. Community underwent this process and now emerged seemingly anew in urban settings.*

3.3 Characteristics of contemporary urban community: challenges and prospects

Following the discussions on the emergence of the urban community outlined above, it is useful to reflect upon its major characteristics in contemporary society in the general context of developed countries. In so doing, this paper suggests three different arenas for the analyses, namely community, the state and society.

As far as the relationship between community and the state is concerned, the former has tended to be subject to the latter. This is because rather than community, it is the state as an entity, at least theoretically agreed upon by its populace, that can purposely govern a certain geographically identifiable space within which social processes can legitimately take place. Although this paper still argues that in the age of globalisation community should not be regarded as being surrounded by the walls (Miller, *op. cit.*), it, albeit to varying degrees, remains under the umbrella of the modern state with demarcated boundaries around it. In fact, the state can play and has played in the recent past a pivotal role in forging community within its sphere of influence in the name of national unity. The modern state has tended to supersede community of comparatively neutral nature.

Superseding the other is easier for the state to do than it is for community as the former has relatively explicit objectives and ideologies, whereas community is merely space for continuous social processes which mould the way that human interrelations and solidar-

ity materialise with varying significance. In this regard, it is useful to pay attention to the sociological distinction between community and the state apparatus; the state is not community but is “one among other associations” (MacIver, 1917, p. 28), which is “an organisation of social beings (or a body of social beings as organised) for the pursuit of some common interest or interests. It is a determinate social unity built upon common purpose” (*ibid.*, p. 23). In fact, in “the Age of Ideologies” (Delanty, *op. cit.*, p. 18) roughly between 1830 and 1989, various states experimented with such ideologies as liberalism, socialism, nationalism and the like, attempting to embody community in search of “a land of milk and honey” (Barthel, 1993, p. 97), even though these two, that is, *the conceptions of community and association are not to be confused with each other.*

We now turn to society in relation to community and the state. This paper has indicated earlier that the state used to exist as an entity separate from community and that in those days society was synonymous with community and vice versa. There were these two arenas. However, society gradually moved away from community and became something different from it; society became more organised according as modernity increased and consequently and inevitably possessed orderly and thus particularistic characteristics. Society has become an arena between community and the state, reinforcing the latter. With society, there are the three arenas now. Unlike the time when there was little difference between community and society, individuals of community now *participate in* society which is organised under the auspices of the state.

Based upon the analyses above, this paper shall point out three of the major challenges facing contemporary community in urban settings. *A first issue is in regards to community's particularity and universality.* Today community cuts across artificially drawn boundaries such as national borders owing to globalisation which embodies “a transformation in the spatial organisation of social relations and transactions—assessed in terms of their extensity, intensity, velocity and impact—generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power” (McGrew, 2000, p. 348).

There has been a tendency for us to talk about community globally. Here are a few examples from the twentieth century. When Tony Blair was prime minister of the UK, his idea centred on and revolved around the idea of community and used the term world/community as many as eleven times in a speech given at the Labour Party Conference in October of 2001 (Blair, 2001; Amin, 2004). However, he had a mistaken understanding

that community was something that was expandable, without realising that this could consequently bring about the suppression or marginalisation of the multiplicity of voices which exist within their allegedly universal community established through their own set of moral and social norms and formal rules. *This is community's universality, one of the mistaken and problematic conceptions of it. This is because it clashes with yet another false conception of community, namely its particularity.*

Universality and particularity can co-exist. In reality, even allegedly universal 'pseudo-community' like Blair's, for instance, is still particularistic in some ways and clashes with other 'self-proclaimed community' groups, ranging from the Islamic Umma down to more small-scale groups which have a specific set of objectives, expansionistic visions, or preference for isolation (e.g. environmental, human rights, animal rights and other groups which choose to be either universalistic or isolationist). These refuse to be absorbed or co-opted by other universalistic pseudo-community or groups. The misunderstanding about community found in common amongst these pseudo-community visions and self-proclaimed community groups is that they fail to see that they are only part of community and thus do not consider anything outside of themselves still constitutes community; there is little substance in these claims. In fact, even Tony "Blair [did] not adopt a single theoretical framework for defining community" (Bentley, 2003).

A second issue related to community is the myth that community was lost or even dead. Wellman's question asks us whether community was lost, saved or liberated. As has repeatedly been indicated in the present paper, community is not something that can be lost. It is always there with us; if pseudo community visions and self-proclaimed community groups mentioned above are to be included too, "community is everywhere" (The Lumpen Society, *op. cit.* p. 22).

True, community in rural settings, which is often associated with the concept of *Gemeinschaft* at the other end of the scale from *Gesellschaft*, has been lost to a large extent (Wood Jr. & Judikis, 2002). However, it is still illegitimate to say that community was lost. Thus, this paper responds to Wellman's question arguing that *community in rural settings was lost to a large extent, but community itself has been saved liberated.* Many think that community was lost and search for it as a thing in the past "mythical golden age" (Barthel, *op. cit.*, p. 97) which thus needs to be restored. Japan has tried putting into practice a nostalgic vision of community to restore community emphasising its national traditions, moral and social norms and values, which culminated in the publication of a documentation entitled "Utsukushii kuni he (towards a beautiful

country)" in 2003.

In relation to this kind of symbolic community, it is important to point out that "certain historic representations are, in fact, representations not of a pre-existing historic reality but of a mythical utopia situated somewhere in the past" and that "[these] can also exist alongside so-called living communit[y]" (Barthel, *op. cit.*, p. 97). Moreover, as we have seen, *community has evolved into urban community. It is not something that has been forged. It is not something that has always been traditional and static*; otherwise we would not be leading the urbanistic life which we are leading today and would still find ourselves in rural settings. However, there has been a tendency for us to associate community with the characteristics of community which we have abandoned ourselves so as to realise and benefit from what we have today—modern urbanistic life. *Utopia has been, is and will be an ideal and stay with us at all times, alongside our actual daily life that continues into the future.*

The problem of community we have today is that the utopia coexists with "dystopia [that] is in the air" (Williams, 2008, p. 2). As mentioned in the beginning, we possess a sense of belonging. In our contemporary urbanistic life, this sense has been satisfied by people's simultaneous belonging to several community-like groups or pseudo-communities (Woods Jr. & Judikis, *op. cit.*), and *this has been made inevitable and possible by a number of groups and associations available today. This has also resulted in further fragmentation of community. The sense of belonging has remained but is now satisfied thinly by such multiple memberships* and "unless you belong to one of the charities, social enterprises, voluntary organisations, you and I are not part of [civil society]" (Clements, 2008, p. 14).

The importance of community has been highlighted according as fragmentation and dystopian characteristics of it, such as urban decay, conflicts, tension and so on, have come to be pointed out more often than ever. This was a sudden turn to the locality that occurred roughly twenty years ago. This is in order to deal with such problems especially and increasingly at a local level of community (Amin, 2005), *whose 'death', however, this paper also argues, has been "a death greatly exaggerated"* (Clements et. al., 2008).

'Restoration' will not work for community because it naturally evolves. What is needed is to think of ways that are compatible with the current state of community. The author of the present paper suggests that there be synergy between associations and groups that have been satisfying people's sense of belonging in fragmented manners. For this to

happen, these bodies will need to become agencies which are “the actions of individuals or groups, and their capacities to influence events” (Thomas & Allen, 2000, p. 189).

In reality, this is difficult and its contribution towards fostering human interrelations and societal solidarity is often small-scale. This is because our contemporary urbanistic community is already fragmented in positive and negative ways. Yet there are cases where agencies co-operate. For example, some regional associations and private corporations can and do together participate in the town planning process which aims to improve mutual interaction through joint town planning, organising social and educational events, and so forth. Also some international and local non-governmental organisations which have different objectives can and do collaborate with each other towards realising joint objectives, targeting a wider body of beneficiaries.

The present paper has mainly provided theoretical review of community. The author is aware of the need for further research into urbanistic community and intends to analyse, following further theoretical scrutiny of the sociological term community in the urbanistic context, the conditions and sets of incentives for such inter-agency synergy.

4. Conclusion: a need for research into the utilisation of agencies

This paper has considered the concept of community and issues around it. First it discussed the *raison d'être* of sociology, referring to the significance of human interrelations and societal solidarity. It then followed to point out the fact that community provides the context for them to take place, proposing a definition of community as space for continuous social processes which mould the way that human interrelations and societal solidarity materialise with varying significance. It also highlighted the fact that community is not static and evolves depending upon social processes of the time; the community which we experience today is a continuation from the past and towards the future. In other words, community is something that is and will be saved. The paper claimed that in contemporary urbanistic context, community has been more liberated than ever, causing fragmentation of community in positive and negative ways. This has also made it possible for individuals to enjoy more freedom, whereas there has been less and less societal solidarity. Yet humans still possess a sense of belonging and belong to multiple associations at the same time. Finally, the paper argued that not nostalgic or utopian search for the lost community, but realistic ways of creating, not restoring, community are needed. In order for this to happen, it is of great importance for us to

analyse the conditions that can foster synergy between agencies, one of the major characteristics of the current state of community in the urbanistic context.

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