

BUILDING “REAL” AND “VIRTUAL” HUMAN COMMUNITIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Summary

Communities are social life support systems through which people have engaged in relationships with one another, have related to the spaces and places around them, and have created meaning with other people. This article examines how current and future contexts of human community challenge traditional interpretations of community as existing in fixed, physical spaces. Processes of globalization, virtualization, and commodification present particular challenges to how community can be interpreted in postmodern contexts. Communities of the twenty-first century will need to be built around the social realities of high levels of mobility, urbanization, cultural interchange, and broad-scale use of communications technologies. Communities will be spatial and nonspatial, local and global, "real" and "virtual." In developing such communities of the future what is needed are not new universal models, but rather, signposts that offer some building directions but no fixed answers. In communities of the twenty-first century each of us becomes an agent of creation—inventors in experimenting with and creating the meanings, shapes, and structures of community. This article provides an overview of the challenges that exist for the interpretation of communities of the twenty-first century, and outlines some of the signposts that may help direct us towards addressing these challenges.

The thing to ask of any new philosophical statement, any extension of computer hardware into schools, universities, or therapists' offices, and of any new toys such as Pac-Man or Apple II, is only this: does it take me into the things I fear most, and wish to avoid, or does it make it easy for me to hide, to run away from them? Does it enable me to shut out the environment, ignore politics, remain unaware of my dream life, my sexuality, and my relations with other people, or does it shove these into my face and teach me how to live with them and through them? If the answer is the latter, then I suggest to you that we are on the right track. If the former, then it is my guess, as Merleau-Ponty says, that we are sinking into a sleep from which, in the name of enlightenment itself, there will be no easy awakening. (Morris Berman, 1990, p. 28)

1. Introduction

The question of what "community" actually *is*, and indeed whether it *is*, has been the subject of countless academic and popular debates, across almost every conceivable discipline. "Community" has been variously described, defined, and analyzed in terms of being a material, locatable object associated with a particular space and place, a subjective human relationship experience, an ideological construct, and a popular reference point. More precise definitions of community abound in academic and popular literature, and though many of these are complex, two key dimensions are common to most definitions: a *geographical* dimension (i.e. communities exist within a spatial context); and a *relational* dimension (i.e. communities involve an engagement in human relationship). With the advent of transport and communications technologies, and under conditions of globalization, both these dimensions of community have been challenged. As a result an exploration of the theory and the practice of community at this particular historical juncture (especially in Western and Northern contexts) is an exploration that is fraught with contestation, consternation, and sociological intrigue. And yet it is also

an exploration filled with endless possibilities—for to engage in the building of community is an ongoing act of extraordinary creativity in which one comes face to face with the struggle of human relationship, of engaging with another. The exploration of community, then, is not merely an academic exercise of examining a sociological construct, but rather, it involves immersing oneself in a subjective and intensely practical expression of how people experience living in a particular social reality or realities at a given period in time.

With this in mind, then, this paper examines the current contexts of community. It begins with a brief overview of how community has been interpreted in the past, and how this has influenced current interpretations. This is followed by an outline of three major challenges posed to any interpretations of community in postmodern contexts—that is, globalization, virtualization, and commodification. Finally, the paper concludes with an examination of possibilities for communities as sustainable life support systems of the twenty-first century.

2. Back to the Futures: From Gemeinschaft to Global Village and a Lasting Nostalgia

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, community was associated with small, village-type contexts—Ferdinand Tonnies' *Gemeinschaft* being the most readily identifiable vision of such a community centered on small, local, close, face-to-face relationships. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, community came to be associated with a more "imaginary" spatial realm—that of the nation-state. The "imagined community" of the nation-state located community away from the "local," or at least redefined what was meant by the "local" in relation to identities defined within the boundaries of certain territories. As we move into the new millennium, the revisioning—some even say, breakdown—of the nation-state has paradoxically forced both a narrowing and an expanding of the horizons of community, with a subsequent reexamination of the location of community, particularly, though not exclusively, in Western societies. The "global village" metaphor demonstrates the interesting juxtaposition of the local (in the form of the village) and the post-national global. The current context of community, then, lies within the realm of both the post-national and the post-spatial, whilst still popularly being associated with a utopianized and uncritical vision of small, close, village relationships for which there remains a collective nostalgia. Thus, many modern interpretations of community, particularly in popular culture, are still rooted in premodern visions of rural villages which have become somewhat idealized. The spaces and relationships which are privileged in such visions are those that are: face-to-face, and thus small-scale; stable; based on values of cooperation rather than conflict; and exist within a culture of participation and a structure of democratic ideals. Modern social theory has been very influenced by the notion that such forms of social relationship have been "lost" through the advent of raging modernity and what has resulted is a collective nostalgia for the type of *Gemeinschaft* which Tonnies put forth as an ideal type, but which somehow worked its way into the imaginations of Western cultures as representing "reality." The works of Tonnies (and of Durkheim, who also put forth a similar model) are, too often, interpreted in a linear framework, in which *Gemeinschaft* is seen to have been replaced by the much darker, impersonal and insecure society, or *Gesellschaft*, characterized by

rampant industrialization, urbanization, and individualism, and thus representing a broad-scale alienation of the populace from one another. The result of such an interpretation has been a theme throughout modern social theory of “rediscovering” community—a search to “find” the community that has been “lost” through the rise of faceless society. This search has taken many, often contradictory, forms, ranging from a relocation and exoticization of community, to abandoning the whole notion of community as meaningless. What is common to all these forms, however, is the theme of the demise of “real” or “authentic” community.

Thus, in some academic quarters community is viewed as “lost” to the masses in “developed,” “modern,” urban, and Western contexts, and increasingly viewed as only existing with an other, located in “less developed,” “premodern,” rural, and non-Western contexts. In other quarters, often within ecology and environmental circles, there exists a desire to “recreate” or “rediscover” community at local level—a desire which frequently drips with nostalgia and oppositional tendencies that are anti-urban, anti-growth, and increasingly anti-technology. In some other political and academic circles, there has been a loud critique of notions of community as having come to represent the handmaiden of an economic rationalist devolution of interventionist government. In such circles, “the community” has become an imaginary space to which governments abdicate responsibilities. From this perspective community becomes a politically useful but practically meaningless concept. On yet another front, the notion of any kind of postmodern community has been “deconstructed” and deemed to be a basically meaningless concept, loaded with emotionality and sentimentality, and meaning only whatever the speaker wishes it to mean at any given point in time. In many senses the academy has become very wary of engaging in further pursuit of a concept that has gathered so much sticky moss on its rolling from the premodern to the modern, making it rather difficult to unpack in this postmodern era where deconstructing conceptual layers is popular.

Yet, in places beyond the academy and the realm of politics, people remain intrigued with and faithful to ideals, values, practices, and processes which, despite academic cajoling, are aligned with community and communal ways of relating. Community, then, is not merely a concept—it is a lived experience, an ongoing struggle, an experiment that defies theoretical or other constructed certainties. Therefore, the academic pursuit of definitional stability or theoretical consistency, to some extent, endangers the everyday usefulness and symbolic significance of the human creation that is community. In this sense, community is, and always has been, a sticking point in the Western Enlightenment project, for it does not subscribe to the rules of reasoned definition—it is as much a magical journey of the psyche as it is an identifiable sociospatial reality.

At this point in history, then, the terrain of community is one that is not only shifting, it is splintering, perhaps even shattering into a multitude of pieces or shards. And yet, there remains, lodged within the popular imagination, a sense in which these shards still form a whole which cannot be shattered by any degree of theoretical or philosophical interrogation. Though partly this imagined whole is somewhat of a nostalgic mirage, it is nevertheless the case that there remains faith in the potentials of communal relationships. Thus, consistent with the conditions of postmodernity, interpreting what

and where community is and how it can be built is very much subject to the paradoxes and complexities of life in the new millennium. The challenges this presents to those interested in building and exploring community in the twenty-first century are examined in the next section.

2.1. Facing the Postmodern Challenges of Conceptualizing and Building Community in the Twenty-first Century

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the bastions of modernity, those peculiarly Western social frameworks that have enjoyed a worldwide spreading since the seventeenth century, have been both eroded and blasted away. What remains now are the exposed skeletons of modern frameworks, baring the deep social paradoxes that are the bones of modernity—indeed the beginning of the twenty-first century could be characterized by these deep social paradoxes. The experience of the postmodern world is, then, on the one hand characterized by unprecedented dislocation of peoples, physically and psychically; feelings of uncertainty, disorder, and constancy of change; the questioning and, in many cases, destruction of traditional forms of social life based on constancy of place, history, and beliefs; and the rise and rise of philosophies of individualism, consumerism, and limitless growth. On the other hand, the modern world is also characterized by the development of a planetary consciousness and increased awareness of interconnectedness and interdependence of people and the environment; increased critique of totaling politics and the development of “politics of difference” through which diversity is valued; increased participation in movements of resistance; and a revitalization of interest in the “local” and in localized approaches to national and international problems. Understanding “community” in this context involves a questioning of what constitutes human relationships under these paradoxical conditions—what do they “look” like, and in what social contexts do they occur? In order to begin this questioning, it is important to understand the challenges presented by the paradoxical forces of postmodernity to how we can interpret what constitutes human community at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is proposed that there are at least three major challenges to interpreting community at this point in history. These challenges can be posed as questions:

1. The challenge of *globalization*: the end of “local” community, or the reinvention of space and place?
2. The challenge of the “*virtual community*”: does technology mean the demise of “real” community?
3. The challenge of the *commodification* imperative: has “community” become “commodity”?

Each of these challenges highlights different dimensions of how the understanding of community at this point in history is about both understanding of the whole terrain across which the shattered shards of modern community have been spread, and about understanding the sharp edges of each one of these shards. In other words, it is no longer the case (if it ever has been) that there can be any unified, universal understandings of community. What emerges from the exploration of postmodern challenges to community, such as globalization, virtualization, and commodification, are merely layers of questions through which we may decipher signposts of possibilities

for communities in the twenty-first century. What is clear in the postmodern context is that there will be no set directions for what constitutes community, but what may emerge from within the resulting confusion are endless opportunities for creating meaningful human relationships which we can name “community.” Postmodernity may mean the end of certainty, but it does not mean the end of possibility. The next three sections will examine the challenges and open some of these cracks of possibility.

3. The Challenge of Globalization: The End of “Local” Community, or the Reinvention of Space and Place?

3.1 What is Globalization?

The latter half of the twentieth century could be seen to represent the penultimate developmental period of Marshall McLuhan’s “global village”—both metaphorically and practically (see Chapter *From the Information to the Communicative Era: Social and Spiritual Issues and Futures*). The “global” represents a socio-spatial sphere which, though by no means “new,” has perhaps for the first time in history become widely recognized and accepted as an increasingly important sphere in terms of analysis and action. The term “globalization” has come to represent the complex processes by which this “global” sphere is recognized as important in as disparate fields as social science, cultural theory, economics, business, and psychology. Despite the burgeoning interest in the notion of globalization, it is a term and a concept that is both poorly understood and often misused. Indeed, globalization has been variously defined and associated with different social and economic processes, endowed with different moral meanings and connected to various future consequences. Further, though it is often described as primarily an economic process, it is misleading to describe globalization as a single process, or as having universally even consequences. Rather, globalization reflects a number of simultaneous, interrelated processes or dimensions through which one could say that the constraints of geography are receding, but which remain uneven in their consequences across the world. Thus, globalization is actually a complex and multidimensional set of processes. It is possible to identify at least five dimensions which, though they can be described individually, are interrelated and together constitute both the precipitating factors of globalization and the dimensions through which the processes of globalization are expressed. These five dimensions are identified and briefly described below, with a particular focus on how they influence the interpretation of social relationships.

3.1.1. Technological Globalization

This dimension of globalization points to developments in both communications technology and transportation technology which have resulted in an increased potential for communicating and traveling across great distances, and in the increased speed and reduced cost of such communications and travel. Technological developments have been said to “shrink the world,” whereby the spatial and temporal barriers that once restricted communication between people in different localities around the world are being challenged—leading to greater mobility of people, information and culture; a weakening of the nation-states’ power to restrict flows of information, financial and service exchange beyond its borders; and a generally increased level of information

accessibility. The resultant “information society” has a profound effect on the way in which social landscapes are shaped—on the way we construct our own identities, our visions of community, and the social world. Effects of this dimension of globalization will be further explored in relation to “virtual communities” in Section 4.

3.1.2. Economic Globalization

This is perhaps the most commonly referred to dimension of globalization—indeed the term globalization is often used specifically to refer to global economic processes. Economic globalization refers to the ways in which these economic processes (such as trade, investment, production, labor, finances, and corporate activities) result in greater economic interdependence between both nations and non-national interests across the world. Such interdependence is also characterized by an increasing dominance of a global culture of economic liberalization, the emergence of a global market, the growing economic influence of transnational corporations, and the spread of capitalism as the dominant economic cultural form. Economic globalization often highlights the increasing subservience of localities to dominant global forces, but also the economic dominance of certain localities over others. Thus, the competitive imperatives which mark processes of economic globalization extend to the spatial realm, with localities competing for attention in attracting global flows of capital.

3.1.3. Political Globalization

Political globalization centers around the processes that present a challenge to the primacy of nation-state sovereignty such as the increased power and influence of nonstate players (such as transnational corporations, social movements, and large nongovernment organizations) and the emergence of issues, problems, and situations that affect all nation-states, but cannot be “solved” by any one state acting independently. In effect, the imagined community of nationalism is challenged under conditions of globalization, with many problems being either beyond the scope of individual nations, or being so localized as not to warrant attention from state bodies. Yet at the same time, nationalism is also aroused under globalizing forces—resulting in decentralizing pressures and breakaway attempts by local areas (this is further examined below).

3.1.4. Cultural Globalization

Cultural globalization refers to the global spread of cultural forms, symbols, and meanings. The globalization of culture is simultaneously a homogenizing process, whereby cultural forms and symbols become universally recognizable and meaningful; and a fragmenting process, whereby differences between cultural forms are emphasized, which can result in the uprise of fundamentalisms associated with the protection of local cultural forms and symbols. The globalization of culture is characterized by reflexivity and relativization, heightened cultural transmission, and cultural commodification. The globalization and commodification of culture is transforming social landscapes around the world—both in terms of homogenization, and in terms of “fragmentation,” whereby cultural groups retreat into fundamentalist revivals of cultural forms to protect them from being infiltrated by the “dominant” culture.

3.1.5. Psychosocial Globalization

This dimension of globalization refers to processes whereby there is a development of “planetary consciousness” amongst people—a recognition of the various crises facing the planet—particularly environmentally, but also, socially, politically, and economically. Furthermore, it suggests the development of a consciousness through which people begin to see themselves in a global context, both in terms of a recognition of shared human commonalities based on the premise that we all share one planet, but also simultaneously of the differences between and diversity amongst peoples of the world. Through psychosocial globalization, the interrelationship of the local and the global becomes a conscious part of the way in which people experience and express their social relationships—in effect, we see our communities in the world, and the world in our communities.

Each of these dimensions of globalization, then, influences the ways in which social relations are constructed and conceptualized—and this has some profound implications for how community (particularly “local” community) can be understood.

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Biographical Sketch

Dr. Ingrid Burkett is a lecturer in community and international development at the University of Queensland, Australia. She has been involved in community development both locally and internationally for the past ten years, and has a commitment to integrating theory, practice, and education in community development. Ingrid has taught community development in a variety of contexts and is involved in regular field-based teaching programs in India and Bangladesh. Her research focuses particularly on the futures of community development, the impacts of globalization on communities and making linkages between social science and natural sciences in promoting integrated community development processes.