Rediscovering community again and again and again!

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Introduction

Community is everywhere it seems. Again. This time round, it seems to have been rediscovered as the ultimate solution to the public disorder seen in various parts of the UK in recent times, though not so far in Scotland. The leader of Edinburgh District Council at the time no doubt had his fingers crossed when he talked about '[strengthening] our will to preserve the great community spirit and resilience we enjoy across our capital city'. Even King Charles, that well-known communitarian, has spoken of how he has been greatly encouraged 'by the many examples of community spirit that countered the aggression and criminality from the few'. Of course, there are many who would dispute the basis and sources of these and many other contemporary claims about the veracity of community. As Marj Mayo (1975) summed it up nearly half a century ago:

> It is not just that the term [community] has been used ambiguously, it has been contested, fought over and appropriated for different uses and interests to justify different politics, policies and practices.

It is particularly useful to recall that 'community' as a policy solution has historically been deployed by governments of different persuasions at times of crisis, and diverse critiques have followed. One of the most influential is summed up eloquently in the title of the publication *Gilding the Ghetto* (CDP, 1977) which argued that the call to community was more about masking the causes of inequality than seriously addressing them. It is also salutary to remind ourselves that the term 'community development' was originally invented by the British

government to lend legitimacy to its post-war colonising project, and to curtail the activities of embryonic independence movements in Africa and elsewhere. This may be more relevant to the current context than is generally appreciated. 'We are here because you were there' is one way of expressing frustration at their treatment by some who have sought refuge on our shores. It should also be acknowledged that community development projects have historically offered one of the few relatively free spaces where people can come together to promote 'conscientisation and transformation' (Mayo, 1994). This confluence of regulation and autonomy is part of its perennial appeal.

With nearly one hundred definitions of 'community' gathered over time, the only common feature appears to be that they are all to do with people. This reminds us about the elusive nature of the term, but also its wider social significance and the way in which it can be adapted, co-opted or weaponised to legitimate or justify a range of political positions and actions which might otherwise be regarded as incompatible. It is clear then that we need to constantly revisit it in light of changing circumstances: to see how its ideological elasticity forces us to think about what it might mean in the here and now, for what purposes, with what potential for collective agency and in whose interests. If the 'problem' of community is acknowledged alongside its possibilities, this very ambivalence may indeed offer some potential for democratic challenge.

The continuities of community

Whilst its contemporary significance is of particular relevance, there are important continuities which may help us to locate community critically in the present:

Community is contested

It has perhaps never been more obvious that community is a contested concept irrespective of context. It has been used over time both to describe things as they are and as they could or should be, to give legitimacy to certain groups whilst ignoring or excluding others. In some cases, to distinguish between '*the* [legitimate] community' and multiple 'communities' which may not adhere to social, political or cultural norms. Without an adequate understanding of the ways in which power relations construct and constrain community identity, we are left with the extended cliches that often dominate public discourse and practice. For example, the classic idea of community as providing a sense of security, significance and solidarity is readily asserted, but all too easily undermined. For some, security implies the exclusion or insecurity of others. Significance may signify the reproduction of unequal roles and relations or reward the assertiveness of the few: a 'consultative elite' of the loudest voices. The belongingness associated with solidarity may be constituted through the non-belonging of others.

So, the question of what constitutes community can close debate down or, if treated as a political process, it may offer the potential for a stimulating and open-ended discussion about democracy. Reclaiming some of the democratic potential of 'community' may also begin to assert collective agency in the face of its increasing appropriation by powerful actors who have much to gain. For example, the corporate appropriation of 'community' and 'inclusion' displayed in multiple advertising campaigns - what Nancy Fraser (2019) describes as 'progressive neoliberalism' - has become so familiar as to pass almost without notice. In the end, it is more useful to think of 'community' as occupying the dynamic space between personal agency and social structure; between micro and macro levels of activity.

Community is contingent

Whilst most local contexts may be subject to roughly the same material circumstances and structures of power, these work themselves through differentially, contingent on a range of specific conditions, circumstances and actors, and it is here where some agency may be exerted. In the UK and Scotland, expectations of the state have changed considerably over recent decades as privatisation and public spending cuts have radically altered what is offered and what is expected, with the community increasingly drawn in as (often reluctant) policy actors. Normalising the community as 'partners' in governing may, at best, offer some democratic possibility, but in the context of diminishing public resources, such complicity can become a substitute or an alibi for properly funded services. Communities are increasingly invited to make their own decisions about priorities as if this constituted a legitimate democratic process, whereas it may actually reflect a rather desperate and cynical invitation for people to make their own *incisions*. It is with supreme irony, for example, that 'lived experience' can as easily be called upon to justify budget reduction ('help us to ... save £143 million by 2028/9') as to ensure democratic voice.

Such potential incorporation of communities is all too often concealed or suppressed in similar forms of misdirection. As James Meek (2024) nicely puts it:

> 'Squeaky little derivative phrases like "the struggle against homelessness" [creep into common discourse] as if homelessness were an illness, an insurrection or a baffling natural manifestation, rather than something entirely within government means to fix'.

It's not difficult to see how such misplaced or manipulative framings of the problem can become personalised or weaponised, instead of being seen for what they are: the outcome of decisions taken by those in power.

In essence, this turns the political into the personal, with the negative consequences for social cohesion that are becoming all too familiar. As Monbiot and Hutchison (2024) point out, 'the persistent trick of modern politics is to disguise economic and political conflicts as cultural conflicts' warning that 'while the rich fleece us, we are persuaded to look elsewhere.' The failure of mainstream parties to address real concerns for increasing numbers of severely disadvantaged people over decades has arguably 'encouraged those pushing identarian grievances to shape the forms of disaffection' (Malik, 2024) seen in recent times. Reversing that equation and challenging those in power to improve social and material conditions for all could potentially provide some much-needed solidarity. The question is, what spaces are or can be made available in the current context? Looking strategically at both the 'invited spaces' of policy, and the 'demanded spaces' of politics can create opportunities for action (Shaw, 2018) which may both challenge power and sustain solidarity; 'rocking the boat while still staying in it' as McArdle (2020) puts it.

Community is contextual

The call to community can clearly never be considered in a vacuum, but is subject to policies, events, pressures and movements that reshape the terrain one way or another. Although there are continuities, the contemporary context must always be our starting point. Contexts differ in many significant ways, but one common current feature is the dominant ideological model or the 'context of all contexts' (Peck and Tickell, 2002): the neoliberal economic framework through which financial motives, markets, actors and institutions have come to colonise every

area of activity worldwide resulting, some would say, in the virtual capture of every area of our lives. This 'invisible doctrine' (Monbiot and Hutchison, 2024), protected by impenetrable volumes of corporate law (see Corporate Watch website), is *the* context that largely determines which political choices are made and whose interests are served. The outcomes and repercussions of these choices, in turn, create the conditions within which dissatisfaction is generated, who is regarded as responsible, and how to respond.

The other, and related, 'context of all contexts' is the digital world within which dissatisfactions can be generated, mobilised, distorted, weaponised, or collectivised towards different publics and purposes: a context in which clicks matter more than facts. Alternative communities emerge out of group identity with a particular interest, dissatisfaction or grudge, thereby merging public and private lives. This context can create both startling bravado and acute anxiety in an already insecure world where both have far-reaching personal and social consequences. What constitutes context has itself become ever more contested. Whilst we should be cautious of claims about what has been described as a mental health crisis amongst the young, for example, many studies show that these claims are not entirely groundless. However, Davies (2024) wisely argues that 'some kind of narrative .... is needed if the trend is to be recognized as a political and economic phenomenon, rather than just ... a blizzard of disparate statistics and diagnoses' which further enrich big pharma. His alternative diagnosis of 'anticipatory anxiety' acts usefully to reframe the crisis, which could equally be applied to those millions of people whose prospects are unforeseeable or hopeless, in a society 'governed in the interests of finance and in which there are no guarantees about the future'.

This reframes the problem, directing our attention towards causation. As Smail (1990), in his seminal analysis of 'the origins of unhappiness' concluded, we are more likely to blame those nearest at hand than those 'distal' forces of power which remain largely unseen. Such blame

can all too easily be directed at those who, as is constantly reinforced across public discourse, are 'not like us'. We shouldn't be surprised if brutal social inequality creates personal brutality. 'Thugs' may be nurtured as much by insecurity as by arrogance. In addition, the precarious certainty offered by the 'unaccountable algorithms of social media' can normalise frenzy as a form of pseudo-democratic engagement, with profound social consequences (Applebaum, 2024). Drawing on Illich, Leonard and Litak (2025, p.40) are concerned that 'the incomprehensible nature of advanced tools and the requirement of specialist knowledge to operate them creates a learned helplessness, and results in the compounding of power to the few that understand'. There are clearly increasing tensions between democracy and technocracy, with elites becoming both more powerful and less visible or accountable (Varoufakis, 2022). At the same time, as Bloomfield and Edgar put it in *The Little Black Book of The Populist Right* (2024), 'conspiratorialist and authoritarian ideas are spreading from national populist ideologues via leading figures in mainstream parties' through technology into the wider population.

Notwithstanding the corrosive potential of the online world, the toxicity of social media only works if there is a receptive audience, and disinformation only persuades where there's already dissatisfaction and distrust. Underlying grievances can all too easily be propagated and capitalised on by cynical actors: 'the reason you haven't had a pay rise is because of this group here; no housing because of that group there' (Meek, 2024). Similarly, when 'job insecurity' or 'the cost of living crisis' are repeated often enough, they become normalised as immutable truths rather than the inevitable result of political decisions. It is highly relevant that in the UK, 7 out of 10 of the most deprived areas saw riots last year. In other words, social structure and personal agency are inescapably interlinked even if not always obvious. There is a job to

be done in reminding ourselves and those we work with of this dialectical position; in reframing the personal within the political and vice versa.

Community is contradictory

It is essential to think of community as an essentially contradictory social, political and educational space. If our particular concern is participation in democratic life, we need to consider participation of what kind, in what terms, and with what degree of power. How can these ambivalent spaces and opportunities be used strategically to exploit both the intended and unintended consequences of policy? Although we live in an era of what has been called 'communicative plenty' (Ercan et al, 2019) in which public views are sought on everything from macro to micro, both online and face-to-face, the question is to what effect, and with what degree of power? Indeed, there may be an overload of personal expressiveness which does nothing to enhance collective participation and democracy. We know that community can be asserted from above as policy, as a managerial procedure in provided spaces, or from below as a democratic process: a demanded space for and of politics (Shaw, 2018). We need to ask how the contradictory nature of community might enable the development of strategies with the most democratic potential.

Challenges and connections

The primary challenge of community, for both activists and practitioners, is how to navigate the space between these competing demands and critiques: to see beyond those factors which inhibit, and to define community in ways which are more inclusive, cohesive and challenging. This means suppressing tendencies towards pessimism by identifying means and ways of engaging people that motivate and enliven. There are real grounds for legitimate anger or rage over material conditions and the politics of redistribution, and there is increasing evidence that

this contributes to a dangerous lack of confidence in democracy which seems to be playing out on the streets and online. But there is a danger that 'fast anger' (Davies, 2022) - 'blind fury or aggressive positivity' - may mean lashing out at each other - what Fanon (1963) called 'horizontal violence'. With the necessary resources, there may also be the potential of building 'slow anger' into constructive, legitimate and collective rage against those structural forces that have created, and benefited mightily from, the problems. This may provide a powerful motivation and role for those working in and with communities in these times.

Governments can only govern through consent and, as Virdee and McGeever (2022) suggest in *Britain in Fragments*, this has been widely undermined over the past decades. The state is increasingly presented as the problem, the market as the solution, in the process disrupting democratic frames of reference and displacing familiar forms of collective agency. Challenging that formulation requires us to think about power and how it can be exposed or subverted. How can such a highly ambivalent context offer opportunities for meaningful community interactions whereby those with the least power can come together to make demands in the interests of all? Gramsci famously framed this kind of conundrum as 'the pessimism of the intellect and the optimism of will': the determination to resist hopelessness despite evidence to the contrary. Exposing power may in fact offer a refreshing educational curriculum for those expected to manage the contradictions of policy: using their status/legitimacy to stretch the policy discourse of 'capacity building' for example. The capacity to make real, purposeful connections may also be a way of challenging the 'compulsory positivity' that dominates social and cultural life and the artificial divisions it creates. Subverting established norms can be very invigorating too, offering sites of pleasure, inquiry, struggle, experimentation, fun, sanctuary, solace, and a real sense of community.

Conclusion: A breath of fresh air

Advocating for hope without seeking possibilities for collective agency can amount to nothing more than corporate spin, implicitly urging submission to the inevitability of market relations: 'Be your best self! You can do it!' (with our products). Raymond Williams (1983) argued that people needed 'resources for a journey of hope'. The ability to imagine a different reality - prefiguring and creating more equitable worlds - is a crucial step towards developing strategies for challenging power. Subverting dominant images, unleashing creative distraction, taking people out of and into themselves and the lives of others, can release people from their immediate reality to imagine a different present and future.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that communities need to come together to find refuge, meet others, express themselves, have access to relevant knowledge, organise collectively and gain some agency in solidarity. Yet so many opportunities for this kind of open-ended engagement have been abandoned or turned towards delivering policy outcomes. If there is one common struggle that might have a chance of success, it may be the demand for provision of more open and independent spaces for people to come together - in youth clubs and community projects of all kinds - to learn, act and challenge. That would surely be the most democratic option. It's been done before. In the absence of these most democratic of spaces, strategic engagement with those spaces that do exist is a necessary if not sufficient tactic (see Shaw, 2018).

An important role for community practitioners and activists in the coming period will to create spaces which foster real dialogue by bringing people together to socialise, debate and argue. It should not be assumed, however, that dialogue will automatically lead to consensus or, indeed,
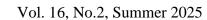
foster solidarity. The politics of living together in the current context requires an honest recognition of the competing interests of individuals and groups. Building a sense of collective identity and common purpose to struggle for a community that fights for equality and social justice for everyone is a painstaking process. It cannot simply be 'delivered' – in any sense of the word.

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Two resources for exploring community connection:

Concept Special Issue on Arts and Culture 2023 A special issue of *Concept*, an online journal, available free through an Open Journal System, enabling authors to write in ways which do not have to conform to strict academic requirements. concept.lib.ed.ac.uk

Community Engagement: A Critical Guide for Practitioners A workbook with ten chapters, each with practical exercises for participants available free on *Concept* website