

Community

Concept: Community

Author: Diana Brydon , University of Western Ontario

Date Entered: 2006-01-12

Description The meaning and function of community has been debated within Western traditions since Plato and Aristotle. Globalization has stimulated renewed discussion of this concept, especially in relation to the rights and responsibilities of citizens, migrants, and refugees; the rise in importance of diasporic and Indigenous identities; and consequently of identity politics more generally. Autonomy as a concept is used to describe the right to self-government of both individuals and the groups that they form. When the nation-state was believed to constitute the main form of group identity, individual and community autonomy could be seen as co-constitutive — that is, as shaping and complementing one another. As globalizing processes have led to changes in the functions of the nation-state, other forms of collective identity have emerged to claim autonomy, both within and beyond the nation-state on the international scene. Thus changes in how communities understand their boundaries both contribute to what we call globalization and are affected by it.

Philosophers now debate the question: Which comes first? The individual or the collectivity? Clearly, social groups form individuals and individuals form groups. One may be born a Canadian, a woman, or a Christian, for example, but none of those different communities need to determine one's personal choices. In fact, many contemporary theories implicitly or explicitly assume that the autonomous individual is prior to the formation of the social group and may even exist independently of any communities wishing to claim him or her. This assumption, while widely held, is also being questioned, with implications for how we understand rights, identity, and belonging.

Community has traditionally been employed to describe a body of people associated through common status, pursuits, or characteristics or organized into a common cultural, social, or political unit. The use of community to describe such groupings may function in a merely descriptive sense but it may also function in an evaluative fashion. Under imperialism, for example, colonized peoples and Indigenous communities were described in ways that denigrated their achievements and their values. These two functions, of description and evaluation, may easily be blurred. What seems merely descriptive may slip into evaluative commentary, carrying positive or negative meanings depending on the context of usage. Some gender theorists, for example, argue that women are socialized in ways that prioritize community, whereas men are not, and that these stereotypes are then employed to judge women as inferior to men because women seem less independent.

This example shows that community may be used to divide one group of people from another and then determine what privileges may follow from such a division. But community may also be employed as a universal: to refer to a global human community, as in contemporary human rights discourse, or to assert that all human beings exist in some association grouped around some form of commonality with others. No person is truly an island. According to these universalist perspectives, everyone needs to belong to something larger than the self and community is usually seen as a good. In this context, assertions of community as a value counter neo-liberal assertions of the primacy of the individual. If the ideology of globalization is seen to promote notions of the autonomous, self-made individual, as in neo-liberalism, then valorizations of community, in countering this view, often also assume an anti-globalization stance. In other contexts, when community is employed to stress the particular or exclusive characteristics of different communities, hierarchies of value may be created, as they were under imperialism, or an absolute relativity of values may be asserted, as in postmodernism. Adjudicating between the claims of different communities, within nation-states and globally, is one of the major challenges of contemporary times.

Some stress the need for establishing order, within a particular nation-state or internationally, through the reassertion of common values, which may mean prioritizing the views of one community above those of others. The communitarian movement, associated with Amitai Etzioni, which arose in the United States in the 1990s, is an example of such a movement. Others, seeing a potential for homogeneity and repression in such moves, suggest instead a need for a "politics of recognition" (Taylor 1994) or an "ethics of respect" (Childs 2003) in which agreements are negotiated on an ongoing basis across different communities of heritage, interest, and practice. Charles Taylor, theorist of multiculturalism, and John Brown Childs, an Indigenous theorist, resist the centralizing thrust of communitarian thinking to imagine looser forms of confederation in which different communities may create flexible and open systems of democratic governance. The notion of "communities of fate" (Williams 2003) seeks to dislodge understanding of community from identity or allegiance to a bounded group toward a recognition that contemporary individuals find themselves tied in a web of relationships with others, some chosen and some not. These entanglements force a recognition of the ways in which our individual decisions affect and are affected by others so that what we share is not identity but rather a situation, a process, a fate. Members of this kind of community are bound by relations of interdependence, whether they like it or not. The term may be used to describe global environmental movements concerned about global warming or local communities concerned about the relocation of jobs from their constituency to another part of the world.

The relation of globalization to community, then, seems to function in contradictory ways. It raises questions that are not easily answered because the answers may vary according to the assumptions, loyalties,

and emplacement of the observer. Does globalization destroy or cement traditional forms of particular communities? Does globalization enable people to envision new forms of particular communities and different modes of trans-communal interactions? Is it leading toward a homogeneous single global culture, toward the fragmenting of the international nation-state system into ever smaller communities, with each claiming autonomy for their group, or are these two movements actually complementary, merely the kind of push and pull that globalization encourages? Is globalization leading to the formation of a cosmopolitan global community? Should such a movement be encouraged? Can cosmopolitanism accommodate difference? Can these different ideas about the relation of globalization and autonomy to community be reconciled?

Whereas in the first half of the twentieth century, scholars puzzled over the relation of the individual to community, it is now more usual to speculate about the functions that communities serve, how they are formed, and how they are changing in response to global deterritorializations (as some communities become less dependent on their location in one particular place) and global flows (as members of different communities become more mobile, migrating and interacting beyond the traditional boundaries of their community). Values universally associated with the idea of community include notions of belonging, rootedness, and connection to others within the designated communal group. Critics of the concept, however, point out that such notions, which stress the value of inclusion within the communal group, may come at a price, possibly allowing little room for individualism or dissent within the community, marginalizing or disadvantaging certain sectors, such as women or racial minorities, within the larger community, and certainly implying the construction and maintenance of borders that exclude others from a particular community identity. Traditionally, communities were more often seen to be formed around non-chosen associations such as those determined by place and birth although there was always some room for intentional communities formed through choice. Group autonomy seems more likely to be favoured within the first type of community, and individual autonomy within the second, but the relation of values of autonomy to those of community remains complex.

The idea of community and the values associated with it are currently in transition. The delinking of community from place and an increased emphasis on the identity-conferring strengths of community are related trends that are usually attributed to globalization. The nation, as the privileged form of "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) throughout most of the twentieth century, is now being rethought and reshaped through globalizing processes. As a result, other forms of community, both older and newer, are assuming prominence. The role of technology in creating new forms of virtual community and the rise of so-called "reflexive communities" or communities of choice are attracting particular attention. Some forms of globalization theory suggest that networks may be replacing the functions once attributed to community, while others point to the rise of

fundamentalist forms of religious and ethnic communities, such as the Hindutva communalist movement in India.

In the twentieth century, different disciplines focused on specific aspects of community. Sociologists stressed social organization; anthropologists, the symbolic structures that gave rise to the notion of separate cultures; geography, the relation of community to place. Political studies addressed political community, citizenship, and civic culture; philosophy considered community within contexts of the relation between the universal and the particular, the ideal and the real, and the self and the other; historians traced its history; and literary studies addressed its function within the creative imagination and its creation through the power of story. Whereas in the mid-twentieth century community was defined in relation to modernization, it is now theorized in relation to globalization. Many now argue that the complex connectivities associated with globalization are causing each discipline to reconsider its traditional mandate, including its definition of community and the ways in which community is employed as an organizing concept for thinking through questions about boundary constructions, identity, and belonging. As a result, the autonomy of individual disciplines — that is, their ability to conceive of their work in isolation from that of other disciplines — is now being questioned. Globalization, as a set of interlocking processes, seems to demand an interdisciplinary approach for its description and evaluation. As a result, cross-disciplinary research on globalization has drawn new attention to the question of scale, to local, regional, and urban communities; transnational and deterritorialized communities; and issue-oriented activist communities. It has also drawn new scrutiny to the formation and maintenance of racialized, ethnic and religious communities. With such a variety of communal identifications now open to each individual, and with the primacy of national identifications apparently waning, an individual's community is less often seen as either given or singular. As a result, community has become a more complex matter, often involving multiple identifications and open to change over time.

- Work Cited: **Anderson, Benedict.** 1983. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Childs, John Brown.** 2003. *Trans-communality: From the politics of conversion to the ethics of respect*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Taylor, Charles.** 1994. *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Williams, Melissa.** 2003. The non-territorial boundaries of citizenship: The function of self-rule and self-protection. Conference on Identities Affiliations, and Allegiances, Yale University, 3-5 October. (accessed 6 January 2006)
- Suggested Reading: **Chodkiewicz, J.L. and R.E. Wiest. eds.** 2004. *Globalization and community: Canadian perspectives*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.

Delanty, Gerard. 2003. *Community*. London: Routledge.

Etzioni, Amatai. 1996. *The new golden rule: Community and morality in a democratic society*. New York: Basic.

Hanen, Marsha P., Alex Barber, and David Cassels. ed. 2002. *Community values in an age of globalization*. Victoria, BC: The Sheldon M. Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership.

This is a pre-print version of **Community** by **Diana Brydon** generated from the *Globalization and Autonomy Online Compendium*. The electronic original is available at http://www.globalautonomy.ca/global1/glossary_entry.jsp?id=CO.0053.