

LIMITLESS AND INTERSECTING COMMUNITIES AND A VIEW OF LIBERTY

A response to Peter Higginson's "The Limits of Community"

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Peter Higginson addresses a number of huge subjects in his 'Limits of Community' piece, but his thinking is unclear.

A community and one's intercourse with it are, of course, 'fluid, patch-worked and contradictory', but it is the sociologist's bread and butter challenge to describe this situation in all its complexity. Individuals act individually; communities or societies act both as sets of individuals *and* as collectives; human beings (as social animals) act both individually *and* collectively.

Peter regards membership of a community (with collective identity and action) as transitory, and believes that it only exists when interaction between individuals is taking place. I believe that community and social life exist primarily inside one's head, not only at the time of one's interactions with one's fellow community members but the rest of the time as well. Interaction is a manifestation of community, but community exists even when there is no interaction. People belong the whole time to real and imagined communities,

from neighbourhoods to nations, from online 'interest groups' to transnational political, sporting or other affiliations. In an extreme example, Robinson Crusoe still strongly identifies with 'England' and 'Englishness' (and tries to impose his ideas of community on his environment and his companion Friday) despite having no direct interaction with other members of this community.

Any community to which you belong constantly changes, and your concept of it and relationship to it will inevitably change accordingly, but it doesn't start as you physically, visually or verbally come into contact with people and end when that contact ends. The bloke in the corner shop is part of my community even when I don't see him for weeks; my extended family and my friends are even more so, even though I might not see them for months.

So what has all this got to do with education, and especially libertarian views of education?

Education is primarily about communication, the transmission and sharing of ideas, concepts and information. In a school context, those who feel most strongly integrated into the community are most likely to learn and reproduce the values of that community. In decades past, this was often referred to as 'the hidden curriculum', whereby societal and political values were integrated into 'the way things are done'. 'Good' students were those who not only absorbed what was taught in the classroom but also embodied the social structures and behaviours of the school.

In my opinion, libertarians (an imagined community if ever there was one!) believe that equal, non-coercive, mutually empowering relationships are a positive route to better learning environments, powerful individuals and dynamic communities. Of course, some institutions (the armed forces and prisons for example) illustrate the direct antithesis of such empowerment, creating cultures of dependency; those who belong and serve often lacking the personal tools for survival as soon as they are 'released' into the wider world.

Traditional schools tend in the same direction, but children who participate in learning from a position of free will and self-motivation, and who feel that their membership and contribution are valued as important (and, in some way, equal – even if others have greater knowledge and experience in certain subjects and contexts) are far more likely to succeed. They are more likely to learn the subject(s) they have chosen to study, and also to have the tools and confidence to ask the right questions, to hone their own learning and to contribute to the learning process for all involved in their learning community.

Community is about participation and ‘ownership’. By this, I mean that those who are part of a community must have a sense that their opinions can be heard by the other members, and that they even have the power to influence and change things. Obvious examples of the opposite situation are people who are alienated from their families, schools and communities and therefore seek either to disfigure or to destroy the authority figures (and buildings) which they perceive as oppressing them. This alienation is often made worse by the attitudes and empire-building of those in power.

Dynamic communities, by contrast, develop a sense of participation, democracy and consensus and are in a constant state of change and evolution in order to incorporate the ideas and needs of *all* who belong to them.

It is regrettable that community groups Peter Higginson has joined have devalued (or even presumed to judge) his dress sense (unless they are fashion and dress-sense communities) and his presentational standards (unless they are communities concerned with presentational skills and values), but surely a powerful, fluid and dynamic group has the right to question the brilliance of the insights of all its members – as long as this is done in a respectful way. He asserts that: ‘[i]deal community should have sensible limits set upon it.’ This concept implies a superior authority which decides such limits. I believe that ideal

community must set its own limits, while at the same time daring to push at the extremes and to play with and include challenging ideas and activities.

There *is* such a thing as community. It exists within all of us in our sense of belonging, empathy and empowerment. It changes constantly, you often cannot see, hear, taste, feel or smell it, but it *is* there all the same.