

THE LIMITS OF COMMUNITY

A LIBERTARIAN VIEW

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David Cameron's new Conservatives have made a point of disowning Margaret Thatcher's famous quip that 'there is no such thing as society' but have adopted a naïve concept of 'strong community' which is both idealistic and centrist. They wish to appeal to a broad spectrum of voters by disowning some of their more elitist and asocial elements, but assume that community is a *given* that everyone must be in favour of, rather than an interrupted and problematic space. Some of the real problems of community would be better solved by a more traditional conservative approach – one that stressed the primacy of individual experience over collective identity and provision.

Obvious examples of the limits of community might include hating the noise from a party next door, finding the prices in my local corner shop extortionate or being angry that the petrol station keeps its lights on all night. The social milieu can be a mine-field, which is why the kind of socialism that promises human freedom through community has always been steeped in bad faith. It ignores the fact that privacy is one of the great values of any society from Windsor Castle to a Wolverhampton tenement.

But there is even a problem with the concept of community when it works well, since as an individual I can never simply be 'in' a community any more than I can be 'in' a world which is really a planet. My intercourse with the world is always fluid, patch-worked and contradictory. When, as a solid citizen, I leave my home in the morning I may consider that home to be 'in' the community but that is not the case unless it is being interactive with the locality – visited, say, by a plumber or an electrician. But if that electrician or plumber is not from my community but from another part of the country, then the service he brings is national, not communal. The nation may be

considered a community in times of crisis (for instance during a terrorist attack) but is hardly a community in the sense that my postman will shortly sit down for supper with Lord Falconer. So my home is what Jacques Derrida once called 'undecided', in that it is not clear whether a mortgaged private property in a national network can ever be simply categorised as communal.

I get in my car. I certainly share this model of car with many other road-users. But though thousands of others own this model, they do not own *this* model. Although the car is definitely 'in' the driving community it is not the community's property, but *mine*, so *ipso facto* it is not 'in' the community in that sense. I drive to work on the M6. Here there is a community of road-users, but they cannot be said to be 'in' a community since the environment is constantly flashing by and no-one here ever speaks. Although we share the same space we are not in any material sense engaged unless the guy in front falls asleep at his sat-nav and involves me in a pile-up, in which case I will be grateful for the assistance of the highly elite emergency services.

The metaphor of 'in-ness' underlies much of the way we see ourselves socially. 'In' a club, 'in' a team, 'in' a world, 'in' a society, we say but in fact we cannot be 'in' something without simultaneously being outside something else. For example, if I am 'in' a gentleman's club it follows that I am not 'in' the community of the street. It also may be that though I am 'in' the club I am not 'in' the in-crowd that plays bridge there on a Thursday evening. As I experience one form of social inclusion, I experience another form of social exclusion: when I join the Freemasons on esoteric grounds I cannot by definition be fully 'in' society. Society is a hall of mirrors and cannot be seen as a monolithic structure which must take precedence over private interests.

In the course of a car journey to the club I will be both intensely private and intensely social, gripped at one moment by Kaiser Chiefs on my cd-player, giving way to the lady in the silver Mercedes at the next. As I slide from the club bar to the Gents I may move from conviviality to depression in a second, hiding my private suffering. Community is an intermittent, tenuous and volatile condition and not all members of communities are gregarious. When I decide to join a local community group I may find quite serious discrimination against me because I am disposed to wear a suit. There is often a collective disapproval of eloquence, presentational standards or

brilliance of insight in these groups; in order to join them one has to disguise one's natural erudition.

People will always be unpredictable in the way that they respond to community initiatives. When Disneyland banned its staff from calling their theme park community 'Mouse-chwitz' they dutifully obeyed, but subsequently renamed it 'Duck-au'. This may seem *de trop* but it's what real people do and we should accept it. The joke debunks the established framework of social policy, as jokes always have done and always should. The hackneyed political use of the word 'community' has long been lampooned from the left by Alexei Sayle ('commooooonity') and should continue to be mocked for its untruths and contradictions.

Schools are often described as communities, but individual children within them often resist this attempt to group them all together. The individual child is more important than the so-called community of the school.

Ideal community should have sensible limits set upon it. For instance, where does my community end? For some people it ends at the end of the street or where the local area is road-signed, for others it ends at the door of the police station, the mental hospital or the local manor, all of which are 'barrier' institutions in the community. There are other necessary limits to sociality, because the community is a 4-dimensional structure. Many communities cease to function at night (villages, for example) whilst others last all the time (*News 24*). Do I 'commune' on eBay as I conduct my transaction for an electronic door-bell for my council flat? Or do I merely transact an exchange? Community is, like the house mentioned at the outset, an 'undecided' in that it has to be produced actively by personal connection, is often discontinuous, and involves huge differences of ethical, aesthetic and practical organisation.

If I choose not to patronise the Asian corner shop to buy my cigarettes then community does not exist for me at that moment. Community is not an existent fact but a fluid matrix of personal decisions. In this sense Margaret Thatcher was precisely right to argue that there is no such *thing* as society. The worship of communal values is a chimera which has led to a multitude of deaths in totalitarian systems. A community must be lived in like a poem, with limit, precision and space, not simply worshipped unquestioningly. There is no such *thing* as community.