the Internet and forms of human association

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The internet is enabling the emergence of new mechanisms of human association which are shaped by – yet also shape – the development of this new medium of communication. My starting point in this chapter is the view that, in late modernity, we are increasingly engaged in forms of social interaction which are becoming intensely reflexive and open-ended. In this respect, technologies such as the internet are serving to increase the capacity for both reciprocal and non-reciprocal communication. These new conditions challenge individuals and organizations to seek out new possibilities for reciprocal bonding and collaboration, and to create opportunities that were previously only associated with the sharing of a common locale. Taking up these challenges, however, raises issues of a complicated kind which are part and parcel of our attempts to generate active trust and integrity in social relationships in which knowledge is increasingly uncertain, and in which clear-cut answers to problems are increasingly absent. A proper understanding of these processes will afford us an essential grounding in our attempts at developing new ways of coping with risk and uncertainty.

Although I shall be arguing in favour of a very different interpretation of the issue, the use of the internet to facilitate gatherings in virtual meeting places has already generated a considerable amount of interest. Howard Rheingold’s work, for example, is often mentioned in this context. He argues that when ‘enough people’ carry on these relationships in virtual reality with ‘sufficient feeling’, and for a ‘long enough’ period of time, ‘virtual communities’ emerge which are only accessible via a computer screen. He describes these communities, in a somewhat traditional fashion, as self-defined networks of interactive communication organized around particular interests or purposes.

People in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk.

People in virtual communities, Rheingold writes, ‘do just about everything people do in real life’. Available studies of online community often have lofty goals and a sense of urgency about them. Rheingold, for example, hopes to ‘inform a wider population about the potential importance of cyberspace to political liberties and the ways virtual communities are likely to change our experience of the real world as individuals and communities’. The problem, however, with most of these studies is that they elaborate the impact of the internet on forms of human association and conduct within strictly limited terms. They do not develop a critical approach to the concept of community in late modernity. As such, they fail to grasp the broader implications of the internet for human association and conduct, beyond that of narrowly conceived online interaction. They often think of participants in these online communities as ‘leaving their bodies behind’ and ‘migrating to virtual communities’ where they are deemed to spin ‘webs of personal relationships in cyberspace’.

By contrast, we need to start working out the implications of Mark Poster’s claim that:

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the internet and virtual reality open the possibility of new kinds of interactivity such that the idea of an opposition of real and unreal community is not adequate to specify the differences between modes of bonding, serving instead to obscure the manner of the historical construction of forms of community.\footnote{5}

In this respect, Rheingold’s own observations concerning his personal experiences of virtual communities are very much at odds with the way he himself approaches them. He explains, for example, that his ‘invisible friends sometimes show up in the flesh, materializing from the next block or other side of the planet’.\footnote{6} From this vantage point, he cannot get close enough to the significance of such face-to-face confrontations and the situated character of everyday life. He writes:

I remember the first time I walked into a room full of people IRL (‘in real life’) who knew many intimate details of my history and whose stories I knew very well. ... I looked around the room full of strangers when I walked in. It was one of the strangest sensations of my life. ... There wasn’t a recognizable face in the house. I had never seen them before.\footnote{7}

We must resist any temptation to follow Rheingold in laughing off such situations as merely involving the clumsiness of a first acquaintance. We must instead take a more positive approach and examine how the internet is contributing to the construction of forms of solidarity and association in which the most intimate and the most distant have become directly connected. We must ask why we are increasingly prepared to subject ourselves to these mixed feelings of intimacy and estrangement in our day-to-day lives. What is it about our modern condition that motivates so many millions of individuals and organizations to participate in forming new forms of social relationship via the internet or intranets? Will the rise of ‘virtual’ communities mean that ‘real’ communities are on their way out, or will ‘real’ communities be transformed and endowed with a new lease of life? How can we relate the reported mediated experiences within online communities to the practical contexts of our day-to-day lives? If we do not begin to sort out issues like these, then we cannot hope to understand how nation-states might, for example, use the internet to tackle problems of governability by fostering new forms of solidarity and identity. Nor will we be able to understand how organizations might use intranets or extranets to promote team work, intrafirm networking and knowledge sharing. Nor will we be in a position to properly comprehend the ways in which individuals might use the internet or intranets in their day-to-day communication to forge new kinds of commitment and mutuality. Moreover, we may not be fully aware of the dangers these new situations might hold and the unintended consequences that might flow from them.

TOWARDS A NEW SENSE OF COMMUNITY?

The concept of ‘community’ is a particularly elusive one. It might be used to refer to the communal life of a sixteenth-century village – or to a team of individuals within a modern organization who rarely meet face to face, but who are successfully engaged in
online collaborative work. In this section, I shall start by examining two usages of the concept of ‘community’ in the light of the complexity of both the reality and the idea. Both usages still occupy a central place in social and political thought today. Second, I shall discuss in what sense these usages are being eclipsed by new forms of human association, and consider critically the appropriateness of the concept of ‘community’ as a way of describing them. I shall end this section by highlighting some of the key difficulties that those wishing to establish new forms of communal solidarity might encounter.

Real and Imagined Communities

The importance of the idea of community in modern social life is often demonstrated by referring to the idea of ‘nation-ness’. It is often perceived as a phenomenon that has achieved the most profound emotional legitimacy in our time. The nation, Mark Poster explains, is ‘generally regarded as the strongest group identification in the modern period and thus perhaps the most “real” community of this era’. Consequently, the modern nightmare, in Manning Nash’s words, ‘is to be deracinated, to be without papers, alone, alienated, and adrift in a world of organized others’. Yet although a nation may be a ‘real’ community, territorially or by way of its symbols – and most certainly so for those who are excluded from it – it differs greatly from the Gemeinschaft of Ferdinand Tönnies. Tönnies formulated this ideal-type to describe cosy realities, where social relationships are based on locality and neighbourliness, fellowship, a sharing of responsibilities, and a furtherance of mutual good through understanding and the exercise of natural sentiment. Viewed from this end of the continuum of social organizations, nations are best defined as what Benedict Anderson calls ‘imagined communities’.

Now, we might argue that there is a fundamental sense in which all communities are imagined, given that their very production and reproduction always presumes the employment of a range of symbolic devices. But in modernity, for nation-states and other forms of modern organization, this is brought to a more intense pitch by the mobilization of power through the storage and control of information and other symbolic content. Tönnies-type communities linger ‘effortlessly, as if merely by dint of physical proximity and absence of movement’. As for communities that are imagined, ‘belief in their presence is their only brick and mortar’. Anderson sets out four senses in which modern communities can be described as being ‘imagined’. First, members of an imagined community will never know most of their fellow members and will never meet, ‘yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’. Second, they are imagined as limited in that even the largest of communities is finite and has boundaries beyond which lie other communities. Third, these communities are imagined to be sovereign and their members dream of being free from the interference of outsiders. Finally, these communities are imagined because, regardless of the inequality and exploitation that might prevail among their members, they are always conceived of as exhibiting ‘a deep, horizontal comradeship’.

Communication media facilitate the representation of this constructed ‘reality’ by making possible the transmission of shared histories of common ‘hows’ and shared
landscapes of common ‘essences’. But also by the sequestration and symbolic expulsion from the imagined community of anything which might intrude.\textsuperscript{15} This whole process has, of course, important ideological implications, as Jean-Luc Nancy argues: ‘The thinking of community as essence ... is in effect the closure of the political’.\textsuperscript{16} In this respect, there are a number of strategies that have gone a long way towards pacifying conflict over the outcome of political and economic decisions. These have greatly contributed to stability in the production and reproduction of imagined communities over time–space. One way in which modern communities have generated a cloak of permanence is by reflexively organizing the horizons of possible activity, for example by inventing a variety of traditions and modern rituals, or by drawing up rules of conduct. A second way involves the defining of issues that may count as being political and, therefore, open to intervention and critique. A third way involves the process of defining generally accepted standards and practices which, if pursued, will make the community better off as a whole.\textsuperscript{17} Mostly these strategies went undiscovered, or were pushed through by ritual assertion, or by the enactment of centralized control. They result in forms of human association constituted by modes of relationship which Michael Oakeshott characterizes as ‘organic, evolutionary, teleological, functional or syndromic’.\textsuperscript{18} Under such circumstances, when individuals are confronted with forms of association with two or more discrepant purposes, they have a limited range of options open to them. Either discrepant purposes have to be suppressed, or they have to be ‘related to one another systematically or in terms of means to end’.\textsuperscript{19} Although these kinds of association do not exist in these strict terms, they are what Oakeshott refers to as ‘compulsory associations ... because the relationships they constitute are those recognized by the authority of common purposes and in terms of the authority of managerial decisions which specify how the common purpose should contingently be pursued’.\textsuperscript{20}

These pacifying strategies are quite successful where, as Giddens writes, ‘people have relatively stable preferences and where their level of reflexive involvement with wider social and economic processes is relatively low’.\textsuperscript{21} Today, however, the success of these strategies is severely hampered by the conditions of late modernity. In culturally cosmopolitan societies, for example, the representations of ‘nation-ness’ are no longer taken as given and acted upon as a matter of course. We only need to think of the various crises that have confronted the Balkan states. But in modern commercial enterprises as well, such conditions are both demanding, and leading to, greater autonomy of action. This is a process which increasingly involves companies having to reinvent themselves in an attempt to gain competitive advantage by allowing their employees to team up non-hierarchically as ‘clever people’, empowered to take decisions themselves on the basis of their knowledge and skills.\textsuperscript{22} Organic, evolutionary, teleological, functional modes of relationship would stifle much of the cutting-edge creativity needed for such a process.

The Revival of Community in Late Modernity

In late modernity, the fear of social disintegration as an unintended consequence of the levelling of hierarchies and the demise of ‘official approving agencies’ is resulting in a renewed interest in community. It is in this context that Habermas draws our attention
to the resurgence of communities which he sees as 'the revaluation of the particular, the natural, the provincial, of social spaces that are small enough to be familiar'. 23 Bauman also writes that 'community is now expected to bring the succour previously sought in ... the legislative acts of the national state'. 24 He points to the new kind of togetherness brought about by so-called 'neo-tribes' that are 'conjured up with the intention of giving those choices that solidarity the choosers sorely miss'. 25

There is, however, a good deal of scepticism concerning the possibility of restoring the certainties traditionally associated with community in present-day social conditions. Giddens, for example, describes it as being an 'impractical dream', 26 and Bauman argues that the modern-day tribes 'share in the inconsequentiality of choices, and change little in the episodicity of the chooser's life'. 27 The communities of late modernity are, therefore, anything but cosy and natural. They are

hard work and uphill struggle, a constantly receding horizon of the never ending road. ... The foremost paradox of the frantic search for communal grounds of consensus is that it results in more dissipation and fragmentation, more heterogeneity. ... The only consensus likely to stand a chance of success is the acceptance of heterogeneity of dissensions. 28

Community today, Bauman asserts, is

thought of as the uncanny (and in the end incongruous and unviable) mixture of difference and company; as uniqueness that is not paid for with loneliness, as contingency with roots, as freedom with certainty; its image, its allurement are as incongruous as that world of universal ambivalence from which – one hopes – it would provide a shelter. 29

This process of 'uncertainization' is one which is only bound to continue and intensify in late modernity. 30

Given these observations we might begin to doubt the appropriateness of the concept of 'community' to describe the rise of new forms of human association in late modernity. There is an obvious tension arising from a general longing for community together with a gradual realization that we cannot go back to the certainties of social arrangements which no longer exist. Let us dwell on this problem for a while, for it would seem that there is a need to seek to understand the opportunities for new forms of association in somewhat different terms, and to rethink what we should expect from them.

At a first glance, it is not difficult to see why, as Castells sometimes suggests, new forms of human association seem to resemble the kind of fragmented 'tribal' societies of days gone by. 31 Yet such a similarity is more apparent than real. Premodern tribal culture may well have been highly fragmented and segmented, but it also displayed a high level of presence availability and it was confined in respect of its configuration across time and space. 32 Modern developments in communication media are creating new networks of information diffusion which are profoundly altering the way in which we can construct shared 'realities'. Any comparison between tribalism of the past and the practices of groups of individuals in the late modern age is at best only superficial and not really very useful.

Neither should we equate new forms of communal life like those described by Claude Fischer in our modern cities with those available in premodern settings. 33 Fischer demonstrates that the infrastructure of modern cities and modern communications provides
the means for generating new forms of human association which were unavailable to individuals in premodern settings.34

Applying the concept of community to the creation of new forms of human association tends to narrow down the spatial and temporal coordinates of their creation in a way that is mostly irrelevant to modern social life. Instead, we ought to emphasize and examine the ubiquitous nature of the thrust towards new kinds of human association, occurring as it does at all levels of our organizational culture: from national and paranational communities to regional and local ones, from communities in economic organizations engaged in collaborative work to communities created by social movements and other groups. No matter how fragmented human experience has become, under reflexive modernization most of us live in the same ‘discursive space’. Giddens writes that ‘there has never been a time when information about current events and problems has been more publicly debated, in a chronic fashion, than in the present day’.35 In this respect, the idea of a twenty-four-hour economy refers to the fact that those who can afford to participate in it now also live in the same ‘discursive time’.

What we are coming to terms with today is that modern communication technologies such as the internet are opening up opportunities for new forms of human association. Today, the production and reproduction of social reality are becoming re-embedded in local communal life in ways that were largely unavailable in previous modern settings. The possibilities of virtual reality are boosting to the extreme the dynamism of modern everyday life by heightening the process which Giddens describes as tearing ‘space away from place by fostering relations between “absent” others; ‘the severing of time from space’, he continues, ‘provides a basis for their recombination in relation to social activity. ... This phenomenon serves to open up manifold possibilities of change by breaking free from the restraints of local habits and practices.’36 In late modernity, the settings for human association come and go at an unprecedented rate, and more often than not individuals participate in a multitude of them.

Such a view radically opposes Rheingold’s interpretation of ‘community’, which he still regards as necessarily deeply sedimented in time. These new forms of human association demand the spontaneous coordination constituted by modes of relationship characterized by Oakeshott not as the ‘organic, evolutionary, teleological, functional or syndromic relationship’ associated with traditional communities, but as ‘an understood relationship of intelligent agents’.37 Being in an intelligent relationship, Giddens writes, ‘means living along with others in a way that respects their autonomy’.38 Consequently, individuals who are thus associated ‘are not partners or colleagues in an enterprise with a common purpose to pursue or a common interest to promote or protect. ... They are related in terms of a practice.’39 The efficiency of these new ways of teaming up can no longer be measured in terms of goals alone, but needs to be evaluated in terms of ‘their capacity to share in a give and take experience’.40

Unlike traditional communities, these new forms of association embrace in Giddens’s view ‘cosmopolitanism, as an attitude of mind and as an institutionalized phenomenon’.41 The cosmopolitan, Giddens argues, often misunderstood as an individualist and as an enemy of old-style communities, is ‘someone who is able to articulate the nature of those commitments, and assess their implications for those whose values are different’. As such, a cosmopolitan attitude is not one in which anything goes, and thus is not a threat to communality and commitment. Nor is it an attitude that insists that
all values are equivalent. It is an attitude which, according to Giddens, emphasizes ‘the responsibility that individuals and groups have for the ideas they hold and the practices in which they engage’.42

There are those who claim that the beginnings of the new kinds of human association we are witnessing today signal our entry into a new age which they label as ‘post-modernity’. However, as Thompson writes,

if the debates sparked off by postmodernism have taught us anything, it is not that the developmental processes characteristic of modern societies have propelled us beyond modernity to some new and as yet undefined age, but rather that our traditional theoretical frameworks for understanding these processes are, in many respects, woefully inadequate.43

As we shall see later in this chapter, the discussion concerning ‘virtual communities’ is deeply steeped in postmodern rhetoric, thus making this a matter to which we shall need to return.

The Problems of Solidarity in Late Modernity

Group identity, Fredrik Barth writes, is always exclusionary in that the way forms of human association are perceived depends on the way their participants view outsiders.44 Any attempt to create new forms of human association on more spontaneous and ‘inclusive’ grounds is therefore beset by a range of problems. Bauman rightly observes that ‘in the world of imagined communities, the struggle for survival is a struggle for access to the human imagination’.45 Besides a great many practical problems, mobilizing the opportunities offered by new technologies of communication will always involve interests that may be contested by others. Let us therefore look at some of the problems which Giddens claims might be encountered in a quest for establishing new forms of human conduct and solidarity in late modernity.46

First, the idea and reality of community has long been bound up with forms of centralized authority and claims to universal truths defended within hierarchically organized social settings. Now, in an era of intensified detraditionalization, neither states nor economic organizations have clear-cut ideas about how dynamic, high-paced, ephemeral forms of human association ought to be run, or about how the direction of their progress ought to be judged. For Jean-François Lyotard,

the community required as a support for the validity of such judgement must always be in the process of doing and undoing itself. The kind of consensus implied by such a process, if there is any consensus at all, is in no way argumentative but is rather allusive and elusive, endowed with a spiral way of being alive, combining both life and death, always remaining in statu nascendi or moriendi, always keeping open the issue of whether or not it actually exists. This kind of consensus is definitely nothing but a cloud of community.47

Thus in an age of detraditionalization we urgently need to address the renewal of tradition guided by tolerance and dialogue.

A second problem to be encountered in establishing new forms of human conduct, Giddens claims, is that the levelling up of hierarchies and of ‘official approving agencies’
could quite easily prove dangerous and result in ‘tyranny’ rather than in new forms of solidarity.48 The prospects hailed by Rheingold and other writers of the anarchic characteristics of the internet might not turn out to be so exciting after all.49 In most industrialized societies, the nation-state has achieved a very high level of consolidation and internal pacification, and hierarchical organizations have equally achieved high levels of administrative unity and control.50 The opening up of all forms of authority to critical questioning results in yet more conflict and struggle. Giddens, in this respect, warns of the possible upsurge of fundamentalism.51 We might also fear the return of oppressive parochiality and other communal pressures as organizations increasingly involve the work of autonomous teams, empowered by new information technologies, striving to deliver projects and benefits at the expense of those preferred by others. Frustrations may run high as we begin to realize, as Bauman explains, that

even with absolute truth defunct and universality dead and buried – some people at least can still have what their past (legislatively predisposed) benefactors, now decried as deceitful, promised to give: the joy of being ‘in the right’ – though now perhaps not at all times, not in all places at the same time, and only for certain people.52

The third problem in establishing new forms of human conduct, Giddens argues, is that the idea of democratization, and thereby the revitalization of community, is a problematic one.53 Guaranteeing the rights of members of a community to free speech and free association, for example, has never led to the successful creation of community. Without some kind of balance between individual freedoms on the one hand and responsibilities for issues that go beyond individual needs on the other, any sense of community may soon evaporate, like Lyotard’s cloud, in the heat of the moment.

The fourth problem recognized by Giddens is that while new technologies of communication may provide the means for creating new forms of action and interaction, they do not automatically result in understood relationships of intelligent agents.54 We need, I think, to be strongly reminded of Thompson’s critique of the notion of participatory opinion formation, a possibility that he believes to be far removed from the political reality and possibility of our time. He writes that ‘at the level of national and international politics, and at the upper levels in which power is exercised in large-scale civil and commercial organizations, it is difficult to see how the idea of participatory opinion formation could be implemented in any significant way’.55

Despite these problems, new forms of human association remain of central importance because they constitute the spaces in which the processes of meaning generation and truth validation are set. As Bauman writes:

Privatized existence has its many joys: freedom of choice, the opportunity to try many ways of life, the chance to make oneself to the measure of one’s self-image. But it also has its sorrows as well: loneliness and incurable uncertainty as to the choices made and still to be made. ... This is why we all feel time and again an overwhelming ‘need of belonging’ – a need to identify ourselves not just as individual human beings, but as members of a larger entity.56

However sceptical we might be about the nature of and need for new forms of human association in late modernity, we need to develop an understanding of the kinds of threats and chances they may bring.
NOTES

2 Ibid., p. 3.
3 Ibid., p. 4.
4 Ibid., pp. 1–16.
7 Ibid., p. 2.
9 Foster, *The Second Media Age*, p. 34.
12 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
19 Ibid., pp. 315–16.
20 Ibid., p. 316.
26 Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, p. 124.
29 Ibid., pp. 334–5.
33 C. Fischer, *To Dwell among Friends: Personal Networks in Town and City* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
35 Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, p. 94.
38 Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, p. 130.
40 J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), p. 120.
41 Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, p. 131.
42 Ibid., p. 130.
51 Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, p. 125.
54 Ibid.