

INTRODUCTION

GIDEON CALDER

Guest Editor

In another age, doubtless, the title of this special issue would have been “The Future of Community”. These days, we tend to hesitate before speaking with such categorical singularity. There are good and bad reasons for this kind of hesitation. The urge to pluralize—to speak of “futures” rather than “a future”, and to recognize the diverse nature of “community” itself—is in some ways a sign of intellectual honesty, and a healthy lack of hubris. Pushed too hard, though, it seems indicative of a certain loss of intellectual and political nerve: a retreat from the task of honing and making more incisive the critical tools with which we examine contemporary society. From the panoply of available forms and definitions of the notion, there is surely constructive work to be done in retrieving a constructive, viable, suitably nuanced sense of “community”: a sense that we can work with.

This is precisely what is sought, in different ways and from different angles, in the contributions to this symposium. And yet to seek such an understanding is not to assume that it need be simple, undialectical, or neatly contoured. Zygmunt Bauman has recently pointed out, “community” is a word with a “feel”, as well as a meaning (Bauman 2001, 1). It invokes feelings of warmth, security, homeliness, and solidarity. If one is in a community, one is, in this sense, in a “good place”. But to stay at the level of such surface connotations would be to neglect their less appealing underside. Whatever the generic attractions of “community” in this loose sense, communities are not, necessarily, the kinds of places we want to be. Some communities are decidedly shoddier than others. According to almost any available definition of the term (see Tunde Puskas’s contribution for a run-through of salient features among recent sociological definitions), communities have, historically, been the best of places, and also the worst of places. The Third Reich was founded on one kind of appeal to “community”. So, as Paul Hopper explores, is the European Union. So are most progressive political struggles. So is football hooliganism. The list could go on for pages. Arguably, the more organic the community, the more homogenous it is, the more successful it is at maintaining a distinct, particular identity, the more likely it is to be exclusionary, repressive, hierarchical and exploitative. So the thriving of community is not simply something to be celebrated; its death would not simply be something to be mourned.

In the contemporary European context, one is equally likely to hear reports of both flourishing and decline. As emerges from Paul Martin's discussion of "cybercommunity", there is a sense in which present and future technological advances may open up frontiers for interaction, which lead to a "purity" of community, which has hitherto been unattainable. On the other hand, this may come at a cost. A constant theme of discussions of community—and one covered in different ways here in the articles by Martin Blanchard and Kalle Pihlainen—is the need to avoid a simple reification or hypostatisation of current relations, discourses or patterns of interaction. At that point, the texture of our intersubjectivity is threatened by the drive to find a neat package by which to preserve and sustain its present forms. Without a certain measure of dialectical open-endedness, we risk a drastic reduction of forms of life, and mutuality between individuals, to a rigid, stultified, desiccated and uninterrogated "status quo".

We cannot, in this symposium, hope to offer a panoramic overview, or a comprehensive reckoning of the current "state of play" with community as a notion, or as a practice. What we do aim to do—as with all work conducted under the auspices of the Society for Applied European Thought, from whose 2003 conference many of these articles originally derive—is provide a fruitful, critical forum for the exchange of important ideas affecting contemporary social horizons in Europe and beyond. Those horizons are, as ever, punctuated both by the allure of "community", and by its complexity and elusiveness. As our contributors show, all three of these aspects are worthy of deeper exploration. All three should be counterbalanced by an acknowledgement that "community" is not a panacea, and cannot by itself provide the basis for social progress. And yet, it remains at the heart of all serious visions of a preferable future.

School of Social Studies
University of Wales, Newport
PO Box 180
Newport NP20 5XR
United Kingdom
gideon.calder@newport.ac.uk