Positioning Society and Community in an Ever Changing World

By

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Abstract

Society is frequently located within a media setting. Embedded with society is the concept of community. Many sociologist scholars, past and present, been fascinated with the concept of 'society' and 'community' because they generate a fascinating discussion on the political contribution of both terms. More than ever before political, community and religious leaders discuss the interrelationships of society and community and how people can better themselves. The aim of this paper is to critically explore the concepts of society and community. The author argues that there needs to be a re-justification of both concepts. The motivation of re-justification of society and community has been socially reconstructed by the impact of globalization.

Keywords: *Community, Social Class, Society,*

1. Introduction

> "The most fundamental and far-reaching of sociology's unit-ideas is community. The rediscovery of community is unquestionably the most distinctive development in nineteenth century social thought, a development that extends well beyond sociological theory to such areas as philosophy, history and theology to become indeed one of the major themes of imaginative writing in the century." (Nisbet, 1967, p. 47)

The terms society and community are frequently used in the public domain. Giddens (1987, p. 32) has argued that the term society is 'ambiguous' and 'it can mean social association or social interaction in general, or it can mean a clearly delimited overall social system.' When the words society and community are used they are applied in rather a loose way. Moreover, when these concepts are discussed in a public setting the individual who is discussing the ideas around society and community are speaking from an individual perspective or have political intentions. In any political setting politicians from different political ideologies use these terms to provide a narrative on how society and communities should work in today's contemporary world. For example, the quotes below are from two British political leaders who have different perspectives on how society and communities should work.

Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, David Cameron:

> "The Big Society is about a huge culture change, where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace, don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities…We need to create communities with oomph – neighbourhoods who are in charge of their own destiny, who feel if they club together and get involved they can shape the world around them." (Prince, 2010)

The former Leader of the Opposition, Edward Miliband:

> "Now I have heard some people say they don't know what we stand for. So let me take the opportunity today to spell it out in the simplest of terms ...This country is too unequal. And

we need to change it…So it starts with one core belief. Our country only works for the privileged few today, not for most people." (Rentoul, 2014)

As the above citations demonstrate both political leaders have a different interpretation on how society and communities should work. David Cameron has the perception of creating a great society or, as he terms, a 'Big Society' whereby people come together in a voluntary setting to empower communities for the better. Whereas, Ed Miliband envisages society currently as being class divided and argues for a society where everyone is equal, regardless of coming from different social backgrounds.

Nevertheless the concepts of society and community have been interpreted in many different ways. From a sociological perspective 'society appears as either an illusion or an unnecessary hangover from classic social theory' (Elliott, 2014, p.5). Contemporary social scientists, such as Gerard Delanty, would argue that merging society and community creates a 'civil society.' As Delanty (2003, p. 8) points out:

> "In early modern thought community and society were virtually interchangeable: community designated the social domain of the 'life worlds', the lived world of everyday life . Although these spheres were to become more and more bifurcated, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries both could express much the same concern. This interchange ability of community and society may be seen in the idea of civil society."

This interesting analysis from Delanty (2003) thus asks the question of how we understand society and community in a contemporary theoretical framework. Hence, this paper has two aims. Firstly, by examining work from historical and contemporary sociological authors the paper will critically examine the concepts of society and community. Secondly, the paper will move on to examine the causes of why society and community have had to change over time.

2. Society and Community

In his book 'The Sociological Tradition,' published in 1967 Robert Nisbet argues that there has been the rediscovery of community. To quote from Nisbet's work (1967, p. 47):

> "The idea of community holds the same pivotal importance in the nineteenth century that the idea of contract had held in the Age of Reason. Then, philosophers had used the rationale of contract to give legitimacy to social relationships. Contract provided the model; of all that was good and defensible in society. In the nineteenth century, however, we find contract waning before the rediscovered symbolism of community. In many spheres of thought, the ties of community – real or imagined, traditional or contrived – come to form the image of the good society. Community becomes the means of denoting legitimacy in associations as diverse as state, church, trade unions, revolutionary movement, professional and cooperative."

It is this notion that places great importance on a stabilised society and the affirmative effect that this has on community. The concept of community has been conceptualised in many different ways. Cohen (1985, p. 11) has stated that the definition of community 'has proved to be highly resistant to satisfactory' and 'all definitions contain or imply theories, and the theory of community has been very contentious.' Overall the term community can be perceived as:

> "Everyone, it seems, wishes to live in a community. Feeling may be more equivocal concerning life in collectives, groups, networks or societies, but the desire to live in a community is something that unites even violent conflicting groups in a deeply divided society" (Bell and Newby, 1974 pp. xlll - xliv).

As stated previously sociologists have diverse definitions on the concept of society. Turner (1999, p. 102) has noted that debate in contemporary world is focused on the separation of society and 'the absence of any effective regulation of the market place.' In this sense the definition of society can be labelled as people from different social backgrounds sharing common values. These common values are made up from different characteristics, namely: culture, gender, race, region, values and activities. At the core of these characteristics is the importance of institutions as Johnson (1995, p. 268) notes:

> "A society is a particular kind of social system that, like all social systems, is distinguished by its cultural, structural, and population/ecological characteristics. Specifically, a society is a system that is defined by a geographical territory (which may or may not coincide with the boundaries of Nation-State) within which a population shares a common culture and way of life under conditions of relative autonomy, independence, and self-sufficiency. It is necessary to specify 'relative' because these are matters of degree in today's world of interdependent societies. It is safe to say, however, that societies are among the most autonomous and independent of all social systems."

Work by Anthony Elliott (2014) has stated that the concept of society can be viewed in a positive or negative light. As Elliott (2014, p. 5) points out 'The more positive of these definitions see society as an indispensible medium for the production of social relations, emphasising the benefits of interpersonal relationships and the potential gains from intercultural communication.' He goes on to argue that society is perceived in a complicated fashion and 'as a process that facilitates not only constitution of identity and elaboration of forms of thought, but also reproduction across time and across spatial of social interactions and of social institutions' (Elliott, 2014, p. 5). Sociologists more than ever before are concerned with society in a theoretical and case study context. This has been motivated by classic social theory.

There have been a number of classic sociologists, namely: Émile Durkheim, Ferdinand Tönnies, Max Weber and Karl Marx who have all been fascinated with the complex processes that make up a society. Ferdinand Tönnies, a German sociologist who has had a wide influence on social theory, contrasts his theory of Gemneinschaft (community) with Gesellschaft (society). In Tönnies work, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft,* published in 1887 Tönnies viewed society as social groups that are sustained by people who live in the community. As Tönnies (1955, p. 27) notes:

> "These social bodies and communities retain their common root in that original state of belonging together which according to our concept is the Gemeinschaft. Indeed, although the original state of common being, living, and working is changed, it retains and is able to renew its mental and political form and its co-operative functions."

However, the observations from Tönnies can be interpreted as over simplified. Other sociologists have different opinions on the concept of society. For example Durkheim understood that 'society is not made up merely of the mass of individuals who compose it, the ground which they occupy, the things which they use and the movements which they perform, but above all is the idea which it forms of itself' (Durkheim 1965 in Elliott, 2014, p. 30). Furthermore according to Hughes et al (1995, p. 14) Max Weber was resolute 'that it is wrong to regard society, or any other collectivity, as a real entity with an existence independent of the living individuals who constitute it.'

In the contemporary world sociologists have interpreted the concept of society differently. This difference has come about by a number of conceptual approaches, such as, post-structuralism, postmodernism and globalisation. As Elliott (2014, p. 6) has pointed out 'studies suggest that the social sciences must radically rethink their subject matter – as a world of 'bounded' societies no longer exist, if indeed it ever once did.' Hence the next section of this paper will critically explore the reasons why societies have changed and why we now live in a global moment.

3.   Changing Community: Towards a Global Analysis

We suggest that to have an appreciation of society and configuration of communities across the world, we need to be aware of the problems of nation states as bordered power containers framed within globalization. Indeed, around the globe there are bona fide challenges facing nation-states as they attempt to adapt to the impact of modifications in morbidity, mortality, and need gradients among diverse segments of their populations. In the face of rapid demographic transformations resulting in fewer casualties from acute diseases, aging of populations and tumultuous economies, there are widening disparities and considerable quality-of-life inequalities within and between populations. In developing countries, China being one of the most striking cases in point but with parallels in a number of other developing countries. The differential in per capital incomes of people in urban and rural communities is at least a factor of three with virtually no top quartile wage earners residing in rural areas (Powell and Cook, 2010). Huge numbers of people struggle with poverty and significant pockets of poverty portend more than lack of income. Those living on the bottom of the socio-economic ladder labor burden of avoidable, lifestyle diseases, hunger and related maladies, not to mention a myriad of social risks. More than 2.5 billion of the planet's population live on less than US $2 a day and nearly a billion still have less than US $1 daily (Chen & Ravallion, 2007). As might be apparent, in this day and age poverty creates conditions in which rationality is redefined, nation-states struggle to control circumstances, not to mention criminality, low birth weights are ubiquitous, ill-health a fact of life, illiteracy rampant, malnutrition commonplace, environmental degradation seen as the cost of doing business, and notions of social justice are brought face-to-face with priorities said to have greater standing (Beck, 1999).

Focusing on the extent of the disparities for just a moment: not only is there asymmetry but real immiseration as well – only about five percent of the world's income is earned by the poorest 40% of its people (Estes, Biggs and Phillipson, 2003). Even with the stalling of mature economies, the gulf between the most advantaged and the most disadvantaged in developed countries is no less dramatic; factor in the impact of gender, ethnicity or other social impediments and the complexity intensifies as formidable inequalities shape well-being (Powell and Chen, 2012). The disparities extend well beyond vital income differentials to quality of life issues, education, structured dependencies or social exclusions resulting from policy decisions (Townsend, 2007). Navarro (2007) posits that escalating differentials can be attributed in no small part to interventionist strategies adopted and endorsed by national governments.

As a consequence of the richest segments of the population having far greater assets and control over their lives, they feel they have more in common with their counterparts in other regions than they do with their less affluent opposite number in their own communities (Hoogvelt, 1997). Cross-cultural comparisons are extraordinarily valuable in helping lay out causal connections and for double-checking inferences. For example, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has a reliable cross-national comparative database of indicators of social policy expenditures in 30 member nations and their state sponsored social welfare provisions entitled Social Expenditures in the period 1980-2003. It covers public expenditures for typical forms of welfare including old age, survivors, incapacity-related benefits, health, family, active labor market programs, unemployment, housing and other social policy areas (education excepted). Shalev (2007) points out that if health and pension benefits are combined as a share of GDP, countries like Sweden rank at the top by devoting some 14% of its GDP to health and pension protections. Data for the period 1980-2001, the latest available on the OCED web-site, suggests that Germany expends about 8% and the United States and Japan about 4%.

In terms of both economics and domestic social policies, the impact of international economic relations has recontoured the societal landscape, so to speak, all the way to the regionalization and appropriation of economic relations. What were once bold lines of demarcation are now dotted

lines more suggestive of administrative spheres than jingoistic borders. In the global century, deregulated markets are tightly integrated with political and social transformations, affecting local circumstances and communality (Geertz, 1973). All in all, the globalizing influences of the early 21st century are producing a distinctive era in social history linked to the emergence of transnational actors as well as economics and technologies that are helping fuel the shifts. Global economic change portends more than alterations in per capita income, the nature of financial products and currency markets, or the rapid circulation of goods, communication or technologies. It is precursor to broad cultural and political shifts that challenge pre-contact arrangements, notions of social justice and solidarity, as well as local interaction patterns. In a post-modern world, globalization is creating interlocking dependencies linked to the ways in which priorities are ordained by transnational interests.

As Chen and Turner (2006) point out in a discussion focused on the welfare of the elderly but equally applicable to all social welfare, the accrual of public benefits reflects the invisible hand of market forces, the invisible handshake of tradition and the invisible foot of political decisions. Despite avowals about the secularity of modern life, economic-thinking, what might be termed spreadsheet logic is accorded near theological status, its canons seen as universally applicable and providing appropriate precept for adjudicating what is considered fair and just. These tendencies are abetted by what is sometimes called the cyber infrastructure, or more simply, informatics, reinforcing these shifts and creating a digital divide separating those on either edge of the diffusion of innovations. Of course there is more to this technological transformation than the appearance of new ways to communicate, it has also paved the way to a post-fordist formulation that Castells (2000) labels network capitalism.

The consequences of globalization are fraught with new risks and ambiguities in daily experience and in the way matters of worth are defined; along with the many positive aspects that are undeniably part of the process associated with privatization. Navarro (2007) points to the privatization of services, public assets and other public provisions in asymmetrical fashion; deregulation of labor and currency markets as well as other forms of commerce; free trade; escalation of an accompanying anti-interventionist rhetoric; encouragement of individualism and consumerism. A number of commentators have noted that a corollary of globalization results in an unprecedented pattern of social risk.

As Townsend (2007) so powerfully points out, the globalization of the marketplace is changing the face of dependency. It is as though the configuration of risks has shifted from settling on just those poor, down and outers living along society's margins to those derailed by restructuring of labor markets, the dramatic spread of employment in service sector jobs, shifts in the types of career patterns that so characterized the 20th century and the role of informatics affecting employability of middle-class workers. These risks are not grounded merely in the absence of resources but in an absence of personal autonomy and by people's position relative to others. Add to these factors the fact that as they wrestle with the issues, national and local governments are assailed from multiple fronts: pressed by transnational interests to provide open trade liberalization for private enterprise and pressure by the growing need for social protections and labor policies to sustain the working populace and those whose lives have fallen through the proverbial social safety net. Ever more inclusive protections call for targeted expenditures at exactly the time when expenditures are hemmed-in by capacity to levy taxes of any type but especially progressive taxes and by powerful interested constituencies. The neoliberal globalizing drive has disenfranchised workers and their representatives in ways that have eroded their ability to bargain for benefits. Many commentators have noted that governments have generally adopted a laissez faire stance when for one reason or another they have chosen not to intervene in the disempowerment of the citizenry in a changing world (Navarro, 2007).

4. Conclusion

This paper has examined the debates surrounding the concepts of sociology and community. As was stated at the introduction both these terms have redefined themselves. These changes have come about due to political, economic, social and cultural processes. At the centre of these process is globalisation. Work carried out by Held et al (1999, p. 1) has noted that 'globalisation reflects a widespread perception that the world is rapidly being moulded into a shared social space by economic and technological forces and that developments in one region of the world can have profound consequences for the life chances of individuals or communities on the other side of the globe.' It was argued that the theory of globalisation has modified the way people live in society. This is clearly evident from the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008 (Castells, 2012). Since the economic crisis of 2008 many societies across the world have experienced 'austerity.' Austerity is a series of policies that seeks to reduce government debt. Hence, there is a notion that austerity has placed a strain on communities. It will be interesting to see how austerity impacts on society and local communities in the next five years.

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