Chapter One

Introduction: The Meaning of Community

The 1960s echo on. Their influence is not always direct, but they loom large in current American intellectual life. One way present attention to community reflects this is in the considerable number of political intellectuals to whom community can really be understood only as expanding participatory democracy. This perspective is directed toward a greater inclusion in and seriousness about participation in politics. Participatory intellectuals lament that in the United States today the citizen all but "disappears from view" due to the "eclipse of community."¹ A community-oriented society would be different. Its members would be a "citizenry that is educated, organized, and empowered."² Moreover, in some versions, participation would go beyond the political as we know it today and encompass economic life and institutions as part of the community.³

Intellectuals who look to community through republican lenses represent another perspective. Sensitive to American history and previous historical experience of republican community, they emphasize the fostering of virtuous citizens, above all public-regarding citizens. Republicans stress that a community devoted to a common good fashioned by public-spirited individuals is the model. Like participatory democrats, they do not want just any community whatever its form, and often they are skeptical of participatory democracy.⁴

Another focus is on community in the more traditional and private sides of life. Those who engage its vocabulary and categories include conservatives of a multitude of hues, feminists and antifeminists, enthusiasts and critics of any traditional communities in human experience such as family and neighborhood. They may not agree with
each other as to what kind of "family" they favor, but they share a recognition of the power of traditional and not entirely public realms of community in human existence. They know these communities are important, and that is why the intellectual struggle over them now is so intense.  

More than ever, calls for community today refer to global community. Inevitably urgent in tone, this mode of thinking about community often speaks from a text devoted to survival of the human species, often all of life, indeed of the planet itself. Survival is not the only motivator, however. There is a considerable mystical and perhaps a romantic strain here as well, an orientation toward something called nature that is as deeply loved as it is variously defined. This understanding of community has received too little attention in formal reflection on the subject, yet it may well be—perhaps it must be—the wave of our future.  

Finally, even as appeals for global community soar, appeals that are frequently couched in distinctly secular language, intellectual reawakening regarding the possibilities of religious community proceeds apace. Of course, community has always been a favorite word in almost all religious vocabularies. But the apparent recent increase in community understood in religious categories—which allows and achieves a myriad of possibilities—has much to do with the unexpected and grudging growth of fascination with religion on the part of some political intellectuals.  

And there are other perspectives. One is an existential view, community defined as our human longing for a union that inevitably lies beyond our reach. This vision of human fate, perhaps a tragic one, exerts considerable appeal now despite, or perhaps because of, the energy directed toward community in contemporary intellectual life. Where others hurry, its proponents amble, frequently avoiding the main paths. Yet there are few gleeful skeptics among the existentialists (as I shall call them). In their dreams they are enthusiasts for community too.  

Not one of these understandings of community dominates the whole. Nor is any one of them, or any of the central arguments, exclusive one from another. The intellectual engagement with community bursts across boundaries with abandon. It displays all the creative freedom that intellectual life and demanding moral agendas
require. What is evident, however, is the reality of the project. Community, its nature, and its desirability are now a part of the conversation of many political intellectuals in the United States; it has become a watchword of the age.

The strength and the diversity of the appeal of community in contemporary American intellectual life guarantees that no definition of the term, no matter how spacious, will easily enclose or tame it. A study of thirty years ago spoke of a hundred definitions; we now recognize that there are hundreds. Some of these are the product of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness among modern social scientists. Many others originate in the popularity of the idea of community today, which necessarily taps a multitude of springs of definition.

It is undeniable too that community is a “contested concept.” Intellectuals are embroiled in arguments over its meaning because major issues are at stake—issues of principle, practice, and policy. Many of these areas of dispute may properly be called definitional controversies; I will return to several such examples. The picture is thus confused and complicated. The meaning of community is elusive, a word without an essence or a text without meaning, as so many appear to be in this day of pluralism, Wittgenstein, deconstruction, and contested concepts.

Yet this judgment need not lead to utter despair. Though not wrong, it may perhaps be too pessimistic. Some definitional themes are present in most discussions of community. It is a loose-bounded concept, but that is not at all the same thing as a concept with no boundaries. Thus though my use will be broad at times, enough so to be contested, it is far from a residual category into which anything and everything may be or will be placed. Community is contested and its contours can be altered, but there are still limits.

The concept of community invariably invokes the notion of commonality, of sharing in common, being and experiencing together. This is the root concept implied in most uses of the word. On the whole, contemporary versions of community distinguish themselves one from another by the specific forms or types of commonality emphasized, participatory democracy, for example, as differentiated from a global community. That the sharing implies an affective or emotional dimension is a usual assumption. It is not that advocates of community spurn rationality (some do, but most do not); it is, rather, that com-
community is and must be a deeply felt experience. That is inherent to what it is. In fact, most communitarians analyze this necessity as incorporating a rational aspect. As Michael Sandel puts it, strong community involves “fraternal sentiments and fellow-feeling,” but it is also a communal “mode of self-understanding” partly constitutive of the agent’s identity. Community goes deep into our souls, and in the process helps us to understand ourselves in quite (but far from exclusively) rational terms. For its denizens community must be seen, chosen, and experienced. Indeed, it really is “shared self-understanding of the participants.” A common life is crucial, but it is not sufficient. A shared life, self-consciously accepted, is required.

Beyond these lightposts of definition, there is no certain signal in the modern conversation about community. Perhaps this is one reason why so much of the effort of the protagonists of our story is spent in denouncing part or all of liberal America and not on defining or even defending community. Analyses differ here too—as do degrees of denunciation. But there is no disagreement over the fact and legitimacy of considerable (intellectual) dissatisfaction. And to that world of complaint, unease, and anger we now turn.