The Dance with Community

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Published by University Press of Kansas

Fowler, Robert Booth.
The Dance with Community: The Contemporary Debate in American Political Thought.

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Chapter Nine

Reflections

The trumpet often sounds for community among contemporary American political intellectuals and produces many more notes than I can present. The diversity of images of community considered here—participatory, republican, global, traditional, and religious—is broad in itself. We have seen that community has its perimeters in contemporary discourse, but it is also wide-ranging (and contentious) in its adherents. Its tents are capacious.

Granted there are contemporary thinkers who do not fit in to the most expansively defined company of intellectual partisans of community. Even the most determined Hartzian efforts at synthesis would fail here. Community cannot begin to encompass easily the entire, cacophonous world of American political intellectuals. There is the somber world of modern economic thought, hardly a playing field for communitarians. This arena often reflects a genteel version of the broader, vigorous libertarian dimension in American political thought which does not have much patience with community, however it is dressed up. Libertarians, whether of the Left or Right, do not agree on an urgent need for community. Quite the contrary. And they fear zealots will sacrifice much liberty as they rush to instantiate community.¹

Others spurn community as a soft-focused ideal which clouds the harsh problems of economics, gender, or race in America. Sometimes they are deconstructionists or postmoderns of one sort or another who see talk of community as interfering with the necessary breaking down of dominant forces and cultures. Some are more traditional radicals less solicitous of dreams of community and more interested in what
they see as justice. Still others are more likely to think a tough political realism about means and ends is what we need now and to scorn those who wander off reflecting on soft ideals such as community.\(^2\)

A sharply contrasting perspective does not quite comprehend what the fuss is about in the first place. What leads so many American intellectuals to leap toward a vision of community? This view holds that the United States, as with any civilization, has its problems but it faces no great crisis except perhaps among a good many political intellectuals. Its basic message is straightforward: The values, institutions, and trends of the U.S. are proceeding nicely, and an obsession with community is hardly requisite.\(^3\)

Finally, there are those who, though not exactly supposing all is well, cannot join in the cries of alarm or chants of community. For them one must be realistic. What we have is less than one might wish or expect to achieve, yet the United States is also a great gift in its freedoms, relative democracy, and pluralism. We must speed the day in which such benefits are everyone’s, but there is no point in chasing after some impossible and questionably noble goal of community.\(^4\)

Thus there are a host of other voices. Still, the community-oriented side of American political thought today is indisputable. Its sway is significant, if also diffuse. It cannot be dismissed as shallow either, though it has as generous an amount of empty rhetoric as does any other perspective. What I propose to discuss here are the continuities I find amidst the diversity, reaching to gain some overall perspective on community as an idea in contemporary American political theory and concluding with some personal reflections, resolving little but joining in the common struggle for understanding.

Four or five considerations deserve our attention, maybe more. One, surely, is the chastened mood of thinking regarding community today. Another is the question of purpose and motivation in the urge toward community, an issue quite related to the matter of communitarians in a mature stage. A third, of course, is the larger meaning of the turn toward community in American intellectual development, a daunting topic but especially so for our time. A fourth is the form of the critiques about the theory of community today. They concentrate on the charge that such a theory is an escape from politics and from social justice, a nostalgic refuge for intellectuals rather than a summons for engagement.
Among some communitarian enthusiasts the days of the Port Huron Statement and the earlier 1960s live on. The 1960s shadow hovers around the outlines of visions of contemporary community, most predictably around participatory democracy as community. This is not surprising since the 1960s was an era of praise for community as an ideal. What is more unexpected is that community is so popular a theme among a fair number of contemporary political intellectuals in the 1980s despite their generally restrained mood.

By this time it is fair to say that the commitment is much more than a superficial fad, not a summer romance and no longer a spring one. No doubt the engagement with community is related to the aura of anxiety in contemporary perceptions and analyses. There is a sober, worried perception of massive problems, which current proponents of the creation of community propose to face. Moving toward more human community is the answer, but it will not be easy. Michael Sandel articulates the sentiment clearly. We can no longer just profess the glories of (one version or another of) community; we must proceed with a reflective sense of past failures and the mixed odds for future success.

Glenn Tinder, the most somber contemporary communitarian, affirms this judgment. The days of the confident utopians in expectant search for the perfect community (as in the perfect wave) must be declared over. Nancy Rosenblum counsels that we must step back from the romantic and unreflective image, the community of “direct relations,” as if it could be composed of friends or even lovers. Jane Mansbridge suggests caution; the mood is chastened.

The reasons are multiple. Some are mundane, though still not to be ignored. Communities cannot make a go of it alone, the warnings often suggest. They need leaders, organizations, even well-thought-through strategies to exist in a larger world. Put another way, good will is far from enough. Moreover, coordination among communities will always be a major challenge. Communities can and do clash, and reflective consideration on how to facilitate coordination will be a permanent need. Even more challenging and related to every other dilemma will be the powerful presence of human selfishness. Even communitarians who are unmistakably children of the 1960s such as Kirkpatrick Sale duly note that self-interest is a constant and not neces-
sarily friendly companion on every journey toward community. It cannot be wished away but only confronted somehow.\textsuperscript{13}

There are those, especially in the participatory tradition, who do want to have almost everything both ways. Thus they proclaim their limitless faith in small group community and simultaneously laud a society with "a broader, more pluralist appreciation for the great diversity of peoples and in our land."\textsuperscript{14} The paradox is that too much internationalism in the local participatory democracy will lead us either to burned-out and disinterested participants or to a crisis of legitimacy. Politics simply cannot become too demanding given our current burdens if it wants to maintain a high level of participation.\textsuperscript{15}

And yes, Nancy Rosenblum is correct when she complains of communitarians who do not ask what the personal costs might be if they encourage unrestrained personal expressiveness in the 1960s manner. "Contemporary communitarians are moved in part by romantic impulses, but they have not learned the lessons of chastened romanticism."\textsuperscript{16} The costs of unchecked expressiveness can be real when it reaches too deeply to expose vulnerable people or interferes with private affections. In such intense and personal situations the opportunities for deep hurt are real.\textsuperscript{17} This is especially true in face-to-face communities where there may be no refuge.

In short, the yearning for community that somehow reflects unfettered freedom is far from gone and the desire to have everything remains intense. Its presence is clearly expressed—and observed.\textsuperscript{18} But it hardly reigns alone anymore; countercycles of awareness are now at work. The general situation reminds me more of the thought of the 1950s when community was considered in terms of limits and restraints and through the eye of existential hope. The easy air of (a certain) 1960s is gone now. Merelman questions just how loose bounded a culture one may have.\textsuperscript{19} Bellah and his associates explicitly attack the idea that expressiveness is the answer, intent on impressing us with the notion that community will require limits.\textsuperscript{20}

This is the message today. For the alarmed globalists it takes center stage; they warn that we have had enough expressiveness. Its wasteful irresponsibility may soon kill us. The republicans are all about creating (or rediscovering) a set of shared virtues to develop a mature common good. Although the varieties of religious communitarians are formidable, a consistent stance is the recognition that community involves
choices made and options denied. The new mood is that community and limits should not be strangers to each other.

It is not merely the limits imposed by institutions and human beings that gain acknowledgement today. Current readings of our history find it far from a universally hospitable story. We know that much of the discussion by communitarians defends the possibility of community in the context of American history. This is the subtext of the work, for example, of many so-called republicans, yet their analysis heralds no basis for optimistic prospects. Pickings look thin. Much of American history—and especially contemporary U.S. history—yields modest inspiration for communitarian enthusiasts, though there are exceptional readings by the most determined optimists (such as Harry Boyte). Complaints would not cover the ground so thickly if there were many promising seedlings of community—or well-tested expectations of seedlings forthcoming. The past is no obvious prologue.

**Purposes**

Considerations of the purposes of community today have also been significant. As we have seen, uncritical and unreflective concentration on expressiveness is over. So is the all but universal praise for community without addressing what it will take for it to flourish, as suggested by the argument of Lawrence Goodwyn that communities must have a purpose or mission if they are to live. No wonder former high priests of community from the 1960s no longer reign untroubled, confronted now by sharp critics who think romantic effusions are irrelevant, impractical, and antipolitical. Newer visions are likely to come in the form of Michael Walzer’s conception of community: complex, pluralistic, restrained. Sometimes they even explore how community and liberalism can be reconciled in America; one of the old verities is quite intact.

Consider the matter of the purpose of community (however community is conceptualized). Often, as we have seen, the goal is mundane—survival—and its motivating energy is practical rather than grand or expressive. At other times the focus is on the expansion of democratic community. This image is routine in the language of
participatory politics, though nowadays it comes as a more modest and less flamboyant gospel than it did twenty-five years ago. The republican model of community invariably appears as a grounded vision, connected with history and avoiding dramatic claims and utopian dreams.

Religious voices for community are a more radical and a more demanding strain in contemporary thought. Even here, though, there are signs of the times, those such as Parker Palmer whose thought is no echo of the 1960s. In their (relative) temperateness they unite with those who think strengthening community in terms of roots is practical. It must be so, they assert, for without the character and boundaries traditions foster we are lost as persons and as a society. Roots are natural to the human. For them modern liberalism has turned out to be dangerously utopian in its cavalier discarding of tradition and its reification of a stripped-down individual.

One may wonder though about the unrestrained expectations of some globalists who are more utopian from one angle than the most optimistic participatory democrats. In their way, after all, globalists are out to save the world—indeed the universe. Still, some skepticism here is appropriate. Globalists can be incautious in making predictions, and their language slips easily into the stridently moralistic, yet they seek to live not by faith but by reason. Their purposes may (or may not) be judged grand by us. However, survival is a distinctly practical, one wants to say mundane, aim. Their community is about this fundamental but also uncomplicated purpose. In general, then, the goals of much contemporary writing about community are restrained, practical, and down-to-earth. They are distinctly signs of the times.

Questions

A chastened mood is often apparent in the house of community as is a modest set of expectations regarding community's purposes. The latter is, of course, an example of the former. The mood has grown restrained, though what remains is at bottom a live faith invoked by a pressing sense of urgency. This conviction can insulate some community-oriented intellectuals. There are problems—intellectual, attitudinal, political, and structural—which require more attention
than they get. One is the tendency to criticize, especially to indulge in a spree of liberal-bashing. It can be more emotionally satisfying (granted, some would say at least as important) to attack liberalism and/or liberal America than to ask some tough questions of oneself. But the cost can be high: neglecting problems of conceptualization, normative defense, and practical development of community.

Moreover, the barrage of criticism is not always more informed or particularly fair, though fairness is not to be expected in intellectual wars. As Nancy Rosenblum has contended, the sweeping excoriations of liberalism do not appreciate its complexity and richness. For example, liberalism too has theorists who incorporated the sentiment of community; John Stuart Mill is a classic nineteenth-century illustration.²⁸

But let us concede the antiliberal chorus is right, that the philosophical, cultural, and institutional ground must be cleared as an essential first step forward. Equally apparent is that something must be put in its place. There have been some serious, meaty, provoking responses to this challenge; Benjamin Barber’s *Strong Democracy* is a welcome recent example.²⁹ More often than one might like, though, there are less happy models. Vague calls for community obviously don’t get us anywhere. And the better the critique, the more awkward the situation when no alternative appears, as in Bellah’s classic *Habits of the Heart*.³⁰

A cluster of difficulties, of course, surrounds the nature of any community. Some of these garner predictable attention, such as problems over property relations, who shall rule, and coordination. Others generate almost inexhaustible arguments. How much must any community proceed from consensus? How much must it be, so to say, a consensus by definition and how much can it be a haven for individual choice? Are communities necessarily about tight boundaries of culture and values? Or can they combine diversity and a range of freedom with a ground of shared community?

Advocates of various kinds of community must tackle this last conundrum far more rigorously than many do. Too many want it both ways, a free community which at the same time has shared meanings, values, and duties. Again, we are not entirely bereft of positive models. Michael Walzer is rewarding for the student of community in this regard as in others. Sensitive to complexity, diversity, freedom and
agreement, boundary and choice, Walzer suggests that efforts to confront this issue seriously are worthwhile, but he stands out as an exception.  

Other problems, as Clarke Cochran has written, include the closely related matters of authority and obligation. Community-oriented intellectuals do not especially honor either concept, and modern models of community are frequently loose bounded. Granted, there are others which incorporate many authorities or values or shared narratives or understandings of the good. This is particularly true of traditionalists, but proponents of religiously oriented community necessarily stress divine authority and in principle support obligations. Globalists obviously tend to grant nature immense authority. Yet authority is an uneasy concept for an intellectual disposition so affected by the free and easy, even anarchistic, 1960s. Obligation and duty are still more in question. The connection between community and anything binding remains strangely uncertain in American thought. Thus whether there can be community without duty remains a major issue. Is such a community possible, conceptually, not to mention practically? Much more thinking is needed, above all much more tough-minded exploration.

Also, I am struck by the shared assumptions behind much communitarian thinking today. The energetic criticisms we explored in chapter two are only part of the (flexible) boundaries of this considerable agreement. Another instance will serve to illustrate others: the attraction of many communitarians to substantive equality in numerous, even all, possible areas of life. Community is often taken to imply equality without question. This tendency is not universal, of course, as theorists of tradition establish, but it is the ordinary assumption, one dominant even among globalists where a suspicious Heilbroner in _The Human Prospect_ is unusual. This pervasive and usually uncontested premise demands more argument than it usually gets. More important, it forces one to examine the texts closely to discover whether community is the actual goal or whether equality is. The answer to this query is vital, for a very different society might easily result from the two visions. Among participatory democrats in particular it is necessary to distinguish those who quite frankly are much more interested in equality than in community.

Another consideration that gives pause about much of the current
discussion of community is its modest intellectual fiber and creativity. For instance, although character is almost a totem among communitarian intellectuals, there is disappointingly little exploration of the concept and only scant new insight from that weak effort. Yet a focus on what people are like, could be like, or what one would want them to be like is essential for students of community in practice or in ideal. Nothing can be more important for any community.

It is true, on the other hand, that character is a concept of growing importance among community-minded intellectuals today. For MacIntyre or Cochran, among others, it is the concept fittingly associated with community. Those intrigued by republican community are particularly concerned with character or virtue. But the issue of character in contemporary theorizing about community often becomes a sectarian question, part of the contest between proponents of various ideas of community, an intramural weapon, for instance, to scold fellow communitarians who do not adequately grant character its primacy. This gets us only so far—about as far as discussions of virtue or character couched in glittering and nearly empty terms such as "community-oriented," "free," "participatory," and the like. Also of limited value are invocations of character and its importance that fail to grapple with how it addresses problems of obligation or authority within community.

This is not to imply that highly optimistic understandings of people hold sway in the literature. They do not. As we have seen, the mood of modern American communitarian literature is frequently chastened and has tempered the more zealous utopian expectations regarding humans. Yet whatever the analysis of human beings, too little depth obtains in current thought about community. The shift toward discussion of character is welcome, but the problem remains. History and criticism are the popular languages; psychology is not, perhaps because it is so difficult a discipline to master and so disturbing to confront.

Larger Meanings: Community, Politics, and Justice

The widespread intellectual alarm that this book examines receives no automatic respect in certain realms. Many of my students cast
a jaundiced eye on it. Along with others, a number of them have wondered if too many American political intellectuals do not suffer from a bad case of nostalgia. In some expressions such as Bell's or Bloom's nostalgia for times (often in their own lives) before the 1960s may be at work. For the republicans nostalgia for a vaguely leftist 1960s recast as a benign Revolutionary War may be present. For religious communitarians perhaps there is nostalgia for another historical age (though which one is in dispute). For those grasping for roots, nostalgia for a lost (but never experienced) past, indeed for an imaginary past, may sometimes be lurking in the background. For some participatory democrats nostalgia for the 1960s, a communal youth experienced and now gone (or fantasized about but now impossible) may be a factor.

This game of exposing signs of nostalgia is one everybody can play. It is not self-evident that it is either patently unfair or false. But the limitation of the critique of nostalgia is that it resolves nothing even if it taps a truth. Knowing that nostalgia is present does not eliminate the value of the quest for community, the arguments about which model is better, or even the use of exploring history for guidance. Nor should it. Why is nostalgia automatically an evil or a false instinct?

The interpretation of nostalgia directs us to another question: Does the engagement with crisis and community tell us as much about the United States as it does about political intellectuals in the United States? As Herbert Gans asks pointedly about Robert Bellah's ideal, do most people want all of this community? He doubts it and doubts on this score are hardly confined to him. This is not the place where the legitimate query can be addressed, much less answered. But suspicions concerning the answer are natural. At the least one must be skeptical of this and every crisis proclaimed by intellectuals.

This is the place, however, to discuss the view that the engagement with community among contemporary American intellectuals represents a disturbing flight from politics. One might argue that community is a replacement for politics, defined as conflict and consensus in the public realm. Such an interpretation draws from both the present critical mood and the considerable affinity for history and nostalgia. It also draws on the particular models of community now afloat. The point is that the near obsession with complaint and the perhaps too frequent journeys into history or nostalgia signal a flight
It does not follow that these activities should be condemned. A fair number of contemporary intellectuals are merely following the path of such predecessors as Marx or Nietzsche. They are clearing the ground and exploring historical alternatives, both essential missions for theory and action. Why are such integral tasks to be dismissed?

I am more impressed with the proposition that the overall fascination with community as it appears in contemporary intellectual life reveals a disinclination for serious politics. On the one hand, community has become almost a mantra for some people and perhaps functions in a similar manner. It is often meant to be a radical idea, but in practice it quietens and calms and leads away from the conflicts inherent in politics.

On the other hand, we have to judge from the particular ideas of community current in contemporary intellectual circles. The fundamental issue is not whether focusing on community in general indicates a desire to escape from politics but whether the specific forms of community that appeal today do so. One properly wonders. Many of the globalists are certainly not interested in politics nor are many of the religious communitarians. The agendas of both are crowded, but more important than politics is the realization of truths which do not require politics for their discovery, articulation, or (in some versions) achievement. From at least one angle many participatory democrats are equally nonpolitical in their reach for consensus and even mutual identity, especially those whose hearts lie in the 1960s.

Yet this is a fiercely contested analysis. Participatory advocates ardently believe that they are the supreme exalters of politics in our disappointing time. They make politics—defined as dialectic and decision in the public realm—the highest of human activities, the way we can experience a communal life and enhanced personhood. From their perspective, they might understand why someone could accuse them of loving politics too much, but to suggest they are hostile to politics makes no sense. Perhaps they are right. But it is not so clear what the range of politics would be in a participatory setting. It never is, though as the sympathetic Jane Mansbridge reflects, participatory democracy may not be the best mechanism when disagreements are substantive. Participatory community celebrates political democracy, but it may
simultaneously generate more pressures to conform than it might wish or expect—the ancient fear.\textsuperscript{40}

A rich politics is central to advocates of republican community. Nothing excites them more than the cause of expanding the range and significance of public, political decision making. They favor politics in their theory of the good society, and their choice of historical models reaffirms and underlines their choice and their sincerity. Yet they too have a good deal of work to do in exploring what virtue, character, and community might mean in circumscribing the boundaries of what is open for political decision.

Some of those most involved in the discussion of roots appear to separate the political and the communal at the expense of the political. Sometimes a great deal may be fixed in tradition and traditionalists place far more emphasis on education than they do on politics. Some tradition-oriented thinkers are committed to a modest public and political realm, though even there they are likely to insist that politics cannot flourish without a foundation of private nonpolitical communities.

Taken as a whole, the record is mixed. There are those for whom community is, if not a substitute for politics, at least distinctly a priority over it. Were this view dominant, it would not astonish anyone. Politics has won few ardent adherents in the American public, and political intellectuals in our culture often share a similar distaste. Still, the main movement lies in another direction. What strikes me about many of the new communitarians is their affirmation of two unpopular ideas in America, community in a public, political sense (as distinguished from a private or a patriotic meaning) and politics itself. Community is less a replacement of politics than it is a new companion for it. Both are to supersede a feeble, apolitical liberalism and its fractured institutions and culture.

Another issue about communitarian thought often raised along with the status of politics is the importance of social justice. It is appropriate to ask of enthusiasts of community whether they routinely skirt awkward questions of justice.\textsuperscript{41} Sometimes critics mean that many communitarian intellectuals do not care enough about the central economic dimensions of life, preferring matters of participation, communication, and expression. More often, the critique comes specifically from the Left where pursuit of egalitarian distribution is either as
important a value as community—or a much more important one. That such a judgment has its adherents fits with chapter four’s discussion that economic democrats often care less about community than about equal distribution of income and wealth.

I do not think the claim that community-oriented intellectuals neglect social justice is persuasive. It concentrates too much on several of the most prominent proponents of community on the American intellectual scene today at the expense of the larger, more diverse communitarian movement. Even if, let us agree for the sake of argument, Michael Sandel is uninterested in issues of justice, others of equal prominence, Michael Walzer for instance, care very much about it. Moreover, justice is integral to religious communitarians; and among many participatory communitarians, of course, the story is the same.

Again, the distinctions must be made. Community theorists usually do consider justice; frequently it is central to their enterprise, as Walzer’s work illustrates. This is not to say that justice is the primary concern except where an identity between community and justice is assumed, nor is there unanimity in seeing justice defined as egalitarian distribution. This is hardly the case. But it is simply inaccurate to fault the political intellectuals who focus on community for ignoring issues of justice or even less plausibly, for antipathy to its considerations. Sometimes it is true, but it is hardly the whole truth.

Existential Community

Analytic reflections can take us only so far. The problematics of the revival of (interest in) community are inescapable but they hardly obviate its major motivation, unease over the health and practice of community in the United States. Here I do not plan to recapitulate the strong tide of complaints that washes against American life, pulling in with it the ideal of community. Nor do I propose to assess the often bewildering and frequently conflicting particular complaints or the variety of possible communities that have their devotees. But even for an intellectual historian such as myself there is room for more personal reflection and argument.

There is, I think, another image of the good community besides
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those so popular today, one at times almost indistinct since it often lies in the shadows of the present discussions. I will call it the existential model of community, a model which emphasizes paradox, tension, even contradiction. Those intrigued by it muse about the possibilities of expanded individualism as well as expanded community, about a shared culture filled with free minds, and about democracy and authority bonded together. In the hands of Glenn Tinder it has moved from academic discourse to discussion among a broader, informed public audience.42

Existential thinkers self-consciously distinguish themselves from the fallacies they perceive in others. Most of all, they have no taste for what they consider the abstract optimism which accompanies a good deal of the enthusiasm for some kind of revival of community today. Existentialists' reality includes sin (if, as is often true, they are religious) or selfishness or whatever it is that ensures discord and tribulation in any community. They acknowledge the paradox that they are committed to a goal in community that may not be possible and would, if realized, guarantee perpetual danger. Finally, these modest champions of community share the considerable engagement with the idea of community defined in terms of individual character above all else. What matters to them is the individual who nourishes community, who thrives in community, the person whom community creates. The individual is the story in community, not in isolation to be sure, but not homogenized and destroyed by absorption into a character-denying community either.

The variations among existential communities are numerous. They are different from each other in their specific, or existential, concreteness. They are the same, however, in valuing this specificity, community fitted to diverse and particular people, conditions, and circumstance. They are also alike in a corresponding skepticism of abstraction, of community visualized apart from the earthy, fallible, real people, and of most other ideals of community. Everything in their approach is governed by a spirit infused with both hope and sadness, the hope of aspiration, the sadness of restricted possibility. This spirit, and the role of spirit overall, is very much in the existential mode. Thinkers interested in existential community in no way constitute a movement or affirm one or another's partisan history; nor are they prophets sounding dogmatic calls to arms. They often have no pro-
gram at all. The spirit is the thing, the hope and sadness about the 
human prospect for developing a character more authentic and com­
munal now and in the future.

Contemporary students of community give passing credit to one 
or another thinkers or traditions that gave birth or rebirth to the ideal 
community. The search for community in history, especially American 
history, is serious business, as chapter three illustrates. The same 
applies in writing about existential community. The path leads to the 
great era of existential thought, the West in the 1950s, as the sometimes 
unacknowledged historical ground for contemporary existential com­ 
munity theorists. In that age existential themes included, necessarily it 
would seem, the invocation of community defined as aspiration, the 
vitalness of hope, and the approval of courageous choice against over­ 
powering and negative winds of despair and meaninglessness.

Camus is an obvious exemplar here, as is Martin Buber, whose 
greatest vogue in his long career was in the 1950s. Indeed, Buber is 
perhaps the more congenial since his language of community is both 
existential and religious in the modern mode. In approaching him 
one approaches the themes of the existential community.

Buber begins in the existential fashion with human selfishness as 
our fate and, more than that, with a recognition of the essential mys­ 
tery of the universe and of each of us alone and in relation with others. 
These realities of human life forbid him to think in a “soft, expres­ 
sionistic” mode. He is, to say the least, neither a Carl Rogers nor an 
Abraham Maslow, and he offers no possibility of romantic affirmation 
or free self-actualization. Such faith is innocent and fatuous. Only 
the most naive could believe the result of rampant individualism will 
somehow be community or unity. “Unity is not a property of the world 
but its task. To form unity out of the world is our never-ending 
work.”

And then there is the power of mystery. “Man is not to be seen 
through, but to be perceived ever more completely in his openness and 
his headiness.” No solution can be considered, therefore, which 
does not involve our “standing and withstanding in the abyss of the 
real reciprocal relation with the mystery of man.” To deny such a 
view is to block out not just reality but the spirit and dignity of every 
person.

Yet Buber did not believe we were lost, surrounded only by the
dark truths of sin or mystery. We also had God, even though we could speak only of "the mystery of God." And we had capacity for dialogue and education and potential for the risk of trust. "Let us dare, despite all to trust!" Above all, there was our ability to love—and thus to strive for community. Love for God and for one’s neighbor led to community—in Buber’s favorite exemplification, the Israeli kibbutzim. Such was the goal, understanding that every experiment to realize it was, of course, always promise, always in process, always partial. It tottered on Buber’s "narrow ridge," as all else did.

Everything filtered in between false dualism. Community could not be nourished in an individual-denying environment or in a naively individualistic one, not in an irrational world or a nonmysterious one, not in capitalism or socialism. It could grow only where dialogue and openness sprouted. It had to be realistic and respond to pragmatic imperatives—including the communal. And of course community had to be chosen by each person, as existentialists always prescribe, chosen in both faith and uncertainty, belief and risk.

Patrons of existential community are uncertain and complex advocates. We know they are earnest supporters of an ideal that cannot occur in existential reality. They are wedded to an ideal which if existentially limited is encompassing beyond measure. Its paradoxes include the understanding that community must not be interpreted as the other part of a lame dualism with the liberal individual—despite what so many other community-oriented intellectuals believe or suspect. Existentialists rightly fear this dualism. They refuse to welcome community grounded in the "all-consuming public spirit such as ancient Greek citizenship or revolutionary republicanism with its Jacobin fervor." Community can never pay empty lip service to human connections or to the collapse of all human distinctions. In Clarke Cochrane’s intriguing formulation, community is not the opposite of "tolerance" or "diversity" but is about their realization. His defining concept is "hospitality." A community can and must be a place of hospitality, a generous and expansive aspiration as attractive as it is problematic.

The centrality of paradox, I think, leads Carey McWilliams to want to edge us closer to the kind of community he prefers to describe as "fraternity" but which I call existential. The Bellamys and Whitmans of our American past make McWilliams uncomfortable, and their modern
descendants do not represent exactly what he has in mind. They incline to understandings of community which are too monistic, too simple. Community is not about the merger of the individual into an army (Bellamy’s Industrial Army, or Whitman’s Union Army for that matter) or into nature, or whatever. Paradoxes, tensions, and problematics do not and should not disappear in community.

It follows that McWilliams is pulled toward the existential perception that human pain and death are not somehow in conflict with or a denial of community. On the contrary, they are givens which can and should constitute powerful spurs toward human community. Community in this view is not an escape from individualism or from death but the coming to terms with existential realities in a fraternal setting.58

It is not surprising that Mark Twain serves as a hero for McWilliams. Twain might seem both too superficial and too corrosive for serious, community-minded intellectuals. But McWilliams’s Twain saw the paradoxes, the ironies, the necessary incompleteness in his own and in human experience and responded by fostering fraternity through his humor. It enabled people to confess to their “fears and pretensions” and to their often painful situations. It freed them to hear the universal call we all have, which for McWilliams’s Twain “is the moral sense.”59 In short, Twain nourished community by helping us to share our limited and universal selves—our existential selves.

Thus at no juncture do existential echoes reverberate more poignantly than when thinkers confront the ideal of community with human frailty as they comprehend it. With Glenn Tinder, for instance, one is instantly back in time and community is confronted, in effect, with the combination of Camus and, since religious motifs haunt this perspective, St. Augustine. It is not the findings of social science or even a particular reading of history that pave the main highway. More than anything else, it is ontology that we must know about, human ontology as it inevitably confronts existence.

This is again the paradox for Tinder. He tells us our being yearns for community and consolation with our brothers and sisters in the deepest reaches of our soul. Yet we cannot satisfy our thirst because of ourselves as well as our circumstances. We are inextricably lonely, separated beings in a world which perpetually conspires to keep us that way. There is no escape. For an existentialist such as Tinder this condition is the heart of our tragedy.60 And it is a tragedy that we
cannot avoid through the false reconciliations of the evils of either idealism or cynicism.  

There is nothing necessarily wrong with efforts to expand those features of our lives which are communal. On the contrary, this is laudable if we accept from the start the existential limits (one hears Camus) on politics, on all human life, that ensure community will be ever elusive. Politics must also and always be where we remind ourselves, where we reexperience the truth that community is beyond us. We must never leap to the illusory and fatal belief that somehow through political action we can break the existential chains that permanently bind our existence. The human costs will be too high, the guaranteed failure too painful. Yet politics is a worthy place to work for community, understanding the inescapable truth that it “cannot be a political creation.” Thus it is proper to describe politics as a place to relearn that we are communal humans alive in a world of stillborn community.

Against the chorus lauding community today—participatory, global, republican, traditional, and others—the existentialist view is sober, maybe even grim. In its most pessimistic expressions, its exponents are driven to assert the power of its drawbacks as “a crucial and neglected truth.” The truth is that “man is not capable of community—not, at least, in any full and stable form.”

Religious and existential vocabularies mix easily. For a writer in this genre, Clarke Cochran for instance, one might as well talk directly of human sin as the decisive constraint. In religious vocabulary it is our selfishness which is the ontological defect we cannot fully conquer. Augustine is the teacher, one might say, of so much of the ontological heritage. It may be expressed in some other fashion; one may discourse on “man’s spacial, temporal, and mortal nature,” but the conclusive reality constantly cited is human alienation and separation. Its origins are one thing, subject to alternative explanation and varying languages. For existentialists it is a given, fixed forever.

Thus there is a tone, sometimes of puzzlement, sometimes of annoyance, among existential communitarians as they experience the enthusiasm for community today. Enthusiasm appears to precede reality. There is too much invocation of community with too little probing of the human condition and not enough recognition that “entry into community is unnatural and difficult.”
and widespread fault in the existing literature on community is an unrealistic optimism." For these existentialists the answer is not an entity called community. Whatever its forms (or meanings), its possibilities look slim. The answer is to continue nevertheless to encourage bonds among men and women for the communal good. For McWilliams this means encouraging fraternity among people whenever possible. Cochran urges us toward his society of hospitality. Tinder advises us to place ourselves in as many communal relationships as possible, granting there will be no community.

It is predictable that those whom I would describe as existential intellectuals concerned with community discuss the kind of people they want to encourage more than they do the forms and practices of community. For them community is at least as much a matter of life lived and attitudes facilitated as it is anything else. The result is their great interest in the matter of character. As with Plato, so with them; it is in our particular virtues and character that community exists. Indeed, admirable character sometimes becomes the substitute for (spatial) community, its goal, and the means to it. Character is everywhere the closest to community that men and women will come.

Clarke Cochran provides an excellent illustration of this focus. He spends much of his effort exploring the formulation of character since in it lies the basis and the reality of community. He singles out such traits as warmth, hospitality, and responsibility to others. Faith is central; so is commitment and tolerance. All these are relevant, of course, to fostering closer human relations and in that sense all are political. Yet conventional political virtues often endorsed by many other communitarian enthusiasts receive fewer affirmations here. Missing, for example, is political participation as crucial to development of character. Emphasis on character does not mean a politics fixated on character building or support for a politics concerned with human formation alone. Yet formation of character is clearly the premier objective because existential community, whether religious or not, is its own good. It is not about any other goal, either of policy or of a more sweeping objective, nor is it about building utopias or applying political truths. Rather, this view seeks to construct community in the polis certainly, but even more in the soul, the only place where community will ever succeed.
My own sympathies lie with the existentialists. Community is not a place or a thing; it is a calling, a struggle, a journey. It is worth engaging, but its form is not obvious now nor will it be tomorrow. Thus I am not uncomfortable with the profusion of ideas about community in contemporary thought. The concept is too rich to be pinned down tightly. The diversity and disagreement are, in my mind, all to the good. They are the basis for the dialectics or the conversation that may lead us closer to community and may remind us that vibrant community is always open, always in process. I maintain, though, that the various worlds of community explored here are part of a movement. Grounded in dissatisfaction with modern liberalism (though not necessarily with its traditional values), modern communitarian thinkers are trying to reconceptualize the world as a more united, more sharing, more meaningful, and more affective place. Innumerable emphases, analyses, and dreams are at work. Yet the project is common, just as it is never ending and ultimately elusive.
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